



BEAU BROWN

NINA CLARE

Beau Brown

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France, 1794

TWELVE-YEAR-OLD BOYS ARE NOT easy to wake at dawn, and Henri was no exception. He felt as though he was being pulled through a tunnel. At one end was some pleasant dream involving a flying horse, at the other end, the distant voice of his tutor calling his name.

‘Get up, get up,’ Monsieur Fortin urged, half dragging Henri from his bed. ‘We must leave. *Now.*’

A hammering noise sounded from somewhere in the manor – crashing sounds and raised voices.

‘What’s happening?’ Henri gasped, bewildered by this odd behaviour from his mild-mannered tutor.

‘Get dressed!’

His tutor was rummaging through the clothes press. He threw a pair of breeches at Henri, then his old woollen coat, the one he wore when fishing in the trout lake on the estate. His riding boots were tossed from across the room.

Henri was too astonished to do anything other than obey the blunt orders, but once he had dressed, he would not move until he got some answers.

‘What’s going on?’ He resisted his tutor’s grip as he tried to tug him across the room. ‘Where’s Papa?’

‘Delaying them,’ his tutor snapped, his usually mild eyes blazing in frustration. ‘So you can escape. *Now quickly!*’

‘Delaying who?’ A sick, twisty feeling began in Henri’s gut.

‘The *Committee*,’ his tutor hissed, his eyes reflecting Henri’s fear. It was the dreaded word – the word which had haunted their lives for the past five years.

Monsieur Fortin yanked wide the servants’ door in the panelling. It led down a flight of back stairs. Henri could hear footsteps pounding the stairs from the first floor. They were coming. He darted through the narrow door, his heart hammering.

It did not feel quite real – the panic, the hurry, the confusion. He was still sleeping. He would wake in a minute and feel that rush of relief when he realised it had only been a bad dream.

Papa had said the Committee would not come after him. He’d agreed to their demands. He’d done all that was ordered. They would be left alone.

‘Papa!’ His father was in the passageway at the bottom of the

stairs. Henri pushed past his tutor, leaping down the last three steps.

‘Thank God your mother did not live to see this day,’ was Vicomte de Courtenay’s greeting. ‘They’re guarding the stables,’ Papa said, but not to Henri; he talked over his head to Monsieur Fortin. ‘Pieter rode over to warn us. You can take his horse. Take Henri somewhere safe.’

‘But it is you who should flee, my lord,’ Monsieur Fortin said.

Papa shook his head impatiently. ‘They would come after me and take Henri too. If I remain, I can delay them. Just take him somewhere safe,’ he groaned. ‘I beg you!’

‘I’ll take him to my cousins in Saint-Maria,’ Monsieur Fortin said resignedly. ‘He’ll be safe there.’

‘God bless you,’ the vicomte said, his voice cracked like dried leather.

‘Papa?’ Henri said, wanting to catch hold of his father round the waist and cling to him as though he were a small boy again. ‘Why have they come?’

His father put a hand to his neck and tugged something. There was a soft snap as the clasp of a chain broke. He crumpled the chain and its locket into Henri’s hands, closing Henri’s fist over it.

‘I won’t go without you,’ Henri said fiercely.

‘Get to England as soon as you can,’ his father said. ‘You have relatives still living. They may help you. They *must* help you.’

‘Mama said she had no family,’ Henri said, confused.

‘None that would own her. But surely they could not turn a child away.’

‘I’m *not* going without you!’

The angry voices grew louder. Someone screamed; it sounded like Madame Gigot, the housekeeper.

‘Go!’ the vicomte said, bundling Henri out into the courtyard and slamming the door on him and Monsieur Fortin. Henri heard the bolt being drawn on the other side.

Monsieur Fortin took Henri’s arm in a determined grip.

‘Papa, come with us!’ Henri cried, resisting his tutor as panic rose.

He was tugged from the doorway, across the yard and thrown up into the saddle; his tutor scrambled up behind him.

Henri strained his neck to look back at his home. Dawn had broken, and a furious sun had risen. The manor lake was to Henri’s right. The water turned red as the sun rose over it. Henri squeezed his eyes shut against the sight, still seeing that ball of fire and that blood-coloured lake behind his eyelids as the horse galloped away.

‘WHAT AM I supposed to do with him?’

Henri stood numbly in the shadowy hallway, being regarded by a man about the age of his father. He knew his name was Monsieur Bruneau, because his tutor had said so. He also knew that Monsieur Bruneau was not pleased to see him.

‘Just keep him safe,’ Monsieur Fortin said wearily. ‘It’s been a long journey. We left yesterday. We haven’t slept.’

‘Safe!’ hissed Monsieur Bruneau. The light from the lantern he held flickered wildly as he swung it between Monsieur Fortin and Henri. ‘Safe! We’re barely ten miles from Paris! What will happen to me if it’s discovered I’m harbouring the son of a vicomte? What will happen to my own boy if I’m dragged off by *them*?’

‘Who is it, Jean?’ said a woman’s voice. Monsieur Bruneau groaned. A tall matron in a frilled nightcap and a voluminous wrapper peered into the hall. ‘Adrien?’ she said doubtfully. ‘Is that you?’

‘Morning, Cousin Marie,’ said Monsieur Fortin with a hasty bow. ‘Sorry to wake you at such an hour.’

Madame Bruneau caught sight of Henri. She looked sharply back at Monsieur Fortin. ‘This is your young pupil,’ she stated. ‘The vicomte’s son.’

Monsieur Fortin nodded. ‘*The Committee*,’ he whispered.

‘He wants us to hide the boy,’ Monsieur Bruneau said to his sister with a shrug of helplessness.

‘There’s no one else I can trust,’ Monsieur Fortin said, looking at Madame Bruneau as though she would be the one to decide the matter. ‘He has no mother,’ he added. ‘No other family, and his father...’ His words trailed away.

‘My father will come for me,’ said Henri, gripping the locket and chain in his fist. His voice sounded brittle, and he spoke through chattering teeth.

There was a heavy pause. Both men looked at Madame Bruneau. ‘He’s half frozen,’ she said. ‘You brought him fifty miles in this weather in such a poor coat?’

‘We fled in haste,’ said Monsieur Fortin. ‘There was no time for anything.’

‘What is your name, young man?’ Madame Bruneau asked.

Henri met her eyes. There was no softness in them, but there was no unkindness either. ‘Henri de Courtenay, ma’am.’

‘You will be Henri Bruneau while you are in this house,’ said Madame Bruneau. ‘You are the son of a relative come from Epernay to begin your apprenticeship. You will earn your keep. There is no idleness here. You will never betray your true name or class to anyone.’

Henri stared mutely back at her.

‘We’ll all lose our heads,’ Monsieur Bruneau groaned, rubbing his

neck.

‘He’s a child, Jean,’ his sister said.

‘Thank you, Marie.’ Monsieur Fortin’s voice was full of relief. ‘He’s a good lad.’ He threw Henri a sad look. ‘He learns quickly. Has a gift for drawing. A good artist’s eye. I must go before it gets light. No one must see me here.’

‘Yes, go,’ Madame Bruneau agreed, gesturing him away.

Monsieur Fortin darted forward to kiss Madame Bruneau’s cheek. He put a hand out to shake Monsieur Bruneau’s hand, but catching sight of the resentment on his cousin’s face, he dropped his arm and only bowed to him. He squeezed Henri’s shoulder. ‘You’re safe here,’ he said.

‘Will my father know where to find me?’ Henri asked, searching his tutor’s eyes for some reassurance, feeling that the last cord to his life was being cut.

‘He will know where to find you,’ his tutor said. But his expression said something altogether different. He squeezed Henri’s shoulder one last time. ‘Be brave.’

‘Come into the kitchen,’ Madame Bruneau was saying briskly. ‘Hot milk and brandy, and then to bed, though what bed I will put you in I do not know.’

Monsieur Bruneau groaned again.

MONSIEUR BRUNEAU WAS A TAILOR, and his sister, known as Madame Bruneau, though she was a spinster, was a seamstress. Their house tall and thin, like Madame Bruneau, was three stories high, four if the tiny attic rooms for the two maids were counted. The shop front, the fitting room, and the workrooms were on the ground floor.

Monsieur Bruneau was a widower, his son Paul left motherless from birth. Paul Bruneau was now a pimply youth of fifteen, three years older than Henri. Paul liked to arrange his hair in the new *à la Titus* style. He had his own bedroom on the third floor and howled with protest when told he must share it with the mournful-eyed newcomer who had turned up one morning in a nightshirt and breeches.

After a week of disharmony in the house, Paul got his way, and Henri was removed from his bedroom into the kitchen alcove, to sleep on a pallet next to Thomas the general manservant.

Henri preferred Thomas to Paul Bruneau, even if Thomas snored. Snores were preferable to snide insults and secret pinches and whispered threats.

‘HE’S NOT COMING,’ sneered Paul Bruneau, coming up behind Henri, who was peering out of the shop window at the street outside. It was a wet, grey day and the heavy showers were keeping customers away that morning. ‘He’s *never* coming,’ said Paul, standing close enough for Henry to smell the cologne Paul had purloined from his father. ‘Papa saw his name in the lists. He didn’t want to tell you. He’s *dead* like the rest of the greedy aristos.’ Henri turned slowly to see Paul make a chopping action at his neck, bulging his eyes and lolling his tongue.

Henri had spoken very little in the two weeks since his arrival at the Bruneau house. He’d ignored Paul’s sly comments; he had not even cared, for it seemed a small grief to bear compared to the one he bore for his father. But now he turned his pinched, haunted face to Paul’s. He looked at those mocking eyes and that sneering mouth and something hot and blinding that he had never felt before surged up.

He sprang so quickly at Paul Bruneau that Paul did not see the fist hurtling at his nose. Paul’s howls brought the adults rushing in. It took Monsieur and Madame Bruneau and Thomas the manservant to pull Henri away.

‘*He’s not dead! He’s not dead! He’s not dead!*’ Henri yelled as they dragged him away, thrashing and shrieking. Paul Bruneau stared after him with his nose bloodied and his foppish hairstyle ruined. He never spoke a word about Henri’s father again.



HENRI PROVED to be an excellent apprentice. There was something in the rhythm of sewing and shearing that soothed his mind. He found satisfaction in forming and shaping new clothes with his fingers. He grew to appreciate the weave of a good damask, or Piqué; the airy softness of a fine batiste or nainsook; the pliability of a buckskin, the shimmer of velvet. He developed a good eye for fabric, and from the age of fourteen, Monsieur Bruneau took him along to the warehouses to pick out cloth. By the time Henri was sixteen he could be trusted to go to the warehouses alone.

Paul Bruneau liked garish colours and admired the *macaronis* and the *incroyables*. ‘Peacocks,’ Paul’s father would say in disgust. ‘Popinjays. Only fit for the stage. A man who knows how to dress is a man the world respects. Clothes are an art form. A work of precision and wisdom.’ He would wave his shears over the workroom table. ‘What are clothes?’ he demanded of Henri, as Paul remained sullen and silent.

‘Clothes are the man,’ Henri said obediently.

‘Clothes tell the world what kind of man it is that stands before them,’ rhapsodised Monsieur Bruneau. ‘Clothes are a window into the soul, and the soul of an artist is *French!*’

The customers liked Henri. They liked his quiet, dignified manner, his attention to detail, his innate understanding of what would flatter their figures and transform them into elegant citizens. Monsieur Bruneau’s business grew. And it was not only Monsieur Bruneau whom Henri’s good eye for line and form and hard work pleased – Madame Bruneau soon learned to rely on his opinion as she drew her designs for her ladies’ fashions. It was Henri she called upon to help complete the trousseau of Mademoiselle Frou, one of the most fashionable actresses in Paris, a commission which catapulted the Bruneaus’ little business into the ranks of the notable fashion houses. Mademoiselle Frou said that Henri had the most beautiful smile and the best eye for a flattering line in all of France. The Bruneaus expanded their workrooms, employed more staff, and grew rich.

TWELVE YEARS PASSED since Henri first arrived at the Bruneaus’ home. He was not paid for his work; he was there to earn his keep. But he could sew for himself what outfits he desired, and kept the tips his clients gave him, which grew from a few deniers in his youth to gold livres. Soon he was being asked for by name by some of the

wealthiest and most fashionable members of society who begged him to move to Paris for their convenience.

It was an indifferent evening in late April when Henri sat down in the family parlour at the end of a busy day. The smell of the dinner cooking wafted up from the kitchen, making his stomach growl, and he distracted himself by taking up the pile of newly delivered papers. The Bruneaus subscribed to the fashion magazines and the papers with the best society columns, detailing the lives and clothes of the leading fashionables of European society. It gave the Bruneaus great satisfaction to see one of their own creations described, and they took note of the trends coming out of London – the only city other than Paris that mattered in the world of fashion.

Henri read aloud to them from the London papers and magazines, his English fluent from his English mother. He picked up a copy of *The Evening Chronicle* and scanned the society columns, looking for any piece of news Madame Bruneau would be interested to hear. His attention was arrested by a name he had not heard spoken since his youth. He drew the paper closer to read the article carefully.

As the cogs and gears of the London season grind once again for our fashionable members, thoughts turn to that most important subject of every drawing room in the Metropolis — “Who are the Eligibles this season?”

The ladies may be eager for their first sight of a certain Mr Morton Butternock – nephew and heir of Lord Lansdowne, 4th Baron Lansdowne of Eastersham Park, Surrey – speculated to make his entry onto the marriage mart this year. And being little more than 30 years of age, the Eligible Mr Butternock is neither too young for the responsibilities of marriage nor too old for dancing.

It was the name of Lansdowne that caused Henri to read and reread the gossiping lines.

Lansdowne was his mother's maiden name. She had been the daughter of a Lord Lansdowne and had lived in a place called Surrey. A pretty house, his mother had said, with great oak trees, older than anyone alive, and a beautiful rose garden, planted by Henri's grandmother. There was a rose, bred by the clever gardener and named after her in honour of her birth: *Miss Elizabeth Lansdowne*, the rose was called.

There could be only one Lord Lansdowne of Surrey. So, he had a grandfather still living. And his grandfather had a nephew, who was his heir. Henri did some mental calculations. This heir would be Henri's second cousin.

He lowered the paper and stared into space, uncomfortable thoughts stirred up by this revelation. He had pushed all memories of his parents away into a safe part of his mind where their loss could not hurt him as it had done as a child. He had taught himself to live

without them, to forget that he was Henri de Courtenay, and to be only Henri Bruneau. He felt no connection to this English Lansdowne family who had cast off his mother upon her marriage. And yet...to know that he had living relatives. Family. It was a strange thought. The dinner gong sounded, and he jumped.

There was champagne on the table when Henri entered the dining room. He looked pointedly at it as he took his seat. 'Are we celebrating?'

Monsieur Bruneau beamed from the head of the table. 'I have made a decision,' he said. 'Pour the champagne,' he ordered the servant.

Madame Bruneau's face gave nothing away. Paul Bruneau scowled around the table, not liking this air of mystery.

When the champagne was poured, Monsieur Bruneau lifted his glass. 'It has been decided,' he said, 'and Madame Bruneau is in accord...'

'Get on with it,' drawled Paul. 'I've a busy evening planned.'

'I am making you a third partner, Henri. And furthermore, *Messrs. Bruneau and Sons* will be opening a shop in *Paris*.'

'What!' bellowed Paul, glaring at his father. 'Messrs. Bruneau and Sons!' He swung his glare to Henri, then back to his father. 'I'm your son! *Me!* You *imbecile!*'

'Paul!' remonstrated Madame Bruneau. 'Do not speak to your father in that manner!'

'I'll speak to my own father how I like, madam!' shouted Paul, getting to his feet.

'Henri has been as good as a son to me these twelve years,' said Monsieur Bruneau, his smile gone, his face darkening. 'I could wish that you had worked one tenth part for the business as he has!'

'*Faugh!*' was the disgusted reply. Paul threw down his champagne glass and ground his heel on it, then stormed from the room.

'Are you well, Jean?' said his sister. 'You look a little grey. Henri, pour him some water.'

'I'm fine, don't fuss,' said Monsieur Bruneau irritably, but he tugged at his cravat to loosen it as though it was suddenly hard to breathe.

'Monsieur Bruneau,' Henri began tentatively, once Monsieur Bruneau had recovered his composure. 'It is handsome of you to offer to do this for me, but I've no wish to divide you from your son.'

'*Faugh!*' spat Monsieur Bruneau, sounding very like his son. 'That lazy, preening peacock makes me ashamed. I know what he gets up to; I hear the stories. Gambling and womanising and running up debts, while we work hard to pay for it all!'

Henri could not dispute a word of this, so he remained silent. The

broken glass was swept up and removed by a servant. Madame Bruneau raised her champagne glass a second time. 'To the newest and best fashion house in Paris,' she toasted firmly.

Monsieur Bruneau lifted his glass with a determined thrust, though his hand shook a little. 'To our new shop in Paris, directed by Monsieur Henri Bruneau.'

Henri felt he could do nothing other than raise his glass and express his gratitude for this unexpected advancement. But the pleasure he should have felt was absent, and it was not merely due to the bad will of Paul Bruneau. It was something to do with that newspaper article. Something had stirred within him at the knowledge that he had a grandfather still living. But as he sipped his champagne and nodded and smiled and acted his part, he determined to throw off such thoughts. His family was here. He was a Frenchman, adopted by the Bruneaus. There had been no displays of affection from them, and he had worked hard for them, but they had saved his life. They had risked their own by sheltering him in those days of terror and bloodshed. He would not let them down now. England had nothing for him. Lord Lansdowne had cast him off when he disowned Henri's mother.

The next day Monsieur Bruneau collapsed on the feet of a leading dignitary while pinning the hem of his new frock coat. The physician said it was a fatal heart attack. The shop window was hung with black crêpe and closed for a period of mourning. The dignitary demanded his coat be finished, for he had a ball to go to next week, or he would not pay one franc of his large, outstanding bill.

'I'm grateful you are here, Henri,' Madame Bruneau said, clutching a black-edged handkerchief in her long fingers. The funeral service had been well attended, and the last of the mourners had gone. Only Madame Bruneau, Paul and Henri remained in the parlour, with the maids clearing away the plates and wine glasses. 'The tailoring side of the business could not possibly continue without you to take it on.'

'Henri's not taking it on,' said Paul in a cold voice. 'I am the sole owner now.'

'Your father wished Henri to be a partner,' said Madame Bruneau.

'He did not make him a partner,' said Paul.

'He intended to. He was to instruct his lawyers to draw it up. You know it full well, Paul. You heard him say so.'

'And now he's dead. And I'm not sharing my business with that cuckoo chick.'

'Henri served your father faithfully,' said Madame Bruneau, her

handkerchief now balled up tightly. 'He made him a lot of money. He was as good as a son to him.'

'Henri stole my father from me,' said Paul. A cruel smile twisted his mouth. 'Because his own got his head chopped off, just as he deserved.'

Henri stiffened in his chair, and Madame Bruneau put a hand on his sleeve. 'Please,' she said quietly. 'Not today. Not on the day my brother is buried.'

Henri clenched his hands into ready fists, but he did not move, except for a tic beginning to pulse at the side of his mouth.

'We will discuss this tomorrow, Paul,' Madame Bruneau said. 'There will be no arguing today. But I do expect your father's wishes to be carried out.'

'You can wish all you like,' said Paul, getting to his feet and tugging down his coat. 'I'm his only son and heir. I own the business, I own this house, and there's no place in either for that traitor's son.'

'Get out of my parlour,' Madame Bruneau said, her voice quivering.

'It's *my* parlour now, Aunt. You heard the will. You may have the right to live here until you die, but *I* am the owner, and I want *that man* gone by the time I come home, or I'll go to the authorities and tell them who he really is.'

'How can you speak such things!' cried Madame Bruneau.

Henri slowly got to his feet and held Paul's gaze, daring him to say one more word.

Paul's sneer slipped a little at the expression in Henri's eyes. He turned on his high heel and strutted to the door, flinging over his shoulder, 'Make sure you're gone before I get back.' The door slammed behind him.

'He doesn't mean it,' Madame Bruneau said, putting her crumpled handkerchief to her mouth, as though she felt sick. 'Don't listen to him. He's not in his right mind. It's the shock of losing his father.'

Henri shook his head slowly. 'We both know that he means it, Madame Bruneau.' He bowed and took her hand and kissed it respectfully. 'Thank you for all your kindness to me. You saved my life and I will never forget it.'

'What are you saying? What are you going to do?'

Henri bowed again and stepped away.

'Henri, where are you going?'

'England.'

'England! But you have no money!'

'I have enough for the fare.'

'But what will you do in England?'

'Perhaps find my mother's family.' He shrugged. 'I cannot stay

here.'

'But to leave the country! This is too extreme. I beg you to stay close by. Paul will change his mind when he sees that the business cannot manage without you.'

'He won't change.'

'But to leave your home! The country you were born in!'

'The country that murdered my father. The country that called me a traitor's son. For twelve years I've pretended to be someone I'm not. I am not Henri Bruneau, I am Henri de Courtenay, son of Vicomte de Courtenay, and my father was a good man who did not deserve to die.'

Madame Bruneau could not answer him.

He bowed one last time and went to pack a portmanteau with what clothes he could carry and his portable sewing box. They were the only possessions he would be leaving with, along with his mother's miniature in the silver locket with the broken chain, snapped from his father's neck.

He dressed down for his journey, knowing the captain would charge a higher fare if he looked like a rich man in his excellent clothes. Even so, the cost was exorbitant, taking most of the money he had saved over the years. The captains could charge what they liked in these days, for they were all private boats. Napoleon had dropped his plan to invade Britain, but travel across the channel had not resumed its former business.

The early crossing from Dieppe was choppy and uncomfortable. Fog swathed the coast of Sussex when Henri disembarked. He had wondered if he might feel a sense of homecoming when he stepped onto English soil. Would the English half of his blood respond to some ancestral memory? But he only felt queasy and exhausted from the journey.

He rested and dozed for a half hour at the fireside of a smoky inn, feeling a distaste for the warm beer, and missing Monsieur Bruneau's good Burgundy. He listened carefully to the accents of the people around him. His English was fluent, but he was keen to lose his own accent; it was clear that Frenchmen were not very welcome in these days of war.

On enquiry, he learned that Eastersham Park, the country home of Lord Lansdowne, was only thirty miles away. He would call there. What had he to lose? The cost of hiring a coach was beyond his means, but he was in luck, for the London coach usually had an outside seat available, and would pass through early in the morning.

When he left the inn to take his seat on the coach, he left behind Monsieur Henri Bruneau. He would have to embrace his mother's English blood now that France had shed his father's. Thankful for his

heavy woollen greatcoat, he stepped out into the mizzle of an English springtime morning as Mr Henry Brown.

The coach lumbered along at a good pace, through capricious winds and ungenial showers and brief flashes of spring sunshine. Henry Brown was on his way to see if there was anyone of his mother's house who would own him as family.



England, 1806

MORTON BUTTERNOCK, namesake, nephew, and heir to Lord Lansdowne, watched his uncle closely.

Uncle Mort looked less pale than a fortnight ago, and this caused Morton some anxiety. But on closer inspection, he could see that the new tinge of colour was of a yellowish hue, indicating a liverish jaundice rather than a bloom of recovering health. This relieved his anxiety.

The physician had left some time ago, leaving behind the usual collection of expensive tonics and tinctures. Now Mr. Lingham, his uncle's lawyer, had come in and was arranging his papers on Uncle Mort's bureau in the corner of the draughty bedchamber. Morton gripped his hands tightly behind his back to keep from rubbing them in glee.

'You're sure you've searched everywhere?' Uncle Mort asked. It annoyed Morton Butternock that his uncle's voice was still gruff and strong. He ought to be wheezing and rasping by now. His eyes were still bright as a blackbird's too, but there was a darkening and hollowing underneath them, a good sign that the kidneys were not up to snuff.

'My agents have made enquiries in all corners of France, my lord,' the lawyer replied. 'It has been twelve years. Either the boy has long since emigrated without a trace, or he has long since departed this mortal world. I am sorry to speak so bluntly.'

'And the law says seven years,' Morton Butternock added, not wishing this vital fact to be forgotten. 'Missing for seven years means he is legally *dead*.'

'No need for *you* to speak so bluntly,' his uncle growled.

Morton gritted his teeth to keep from saying anything else that might annoy his uncle. It would not do to rile the old termagant while he had his lawyer and his last will and testament in the same room. He made a little bow of deference and stepped back into the shadowy corner. It was an overcast, gloomy day outside, despite it being May. It drizzled unceasingly, and the light was as thin as his uncle's face. It looked thinner than a fortnight ago, Morton thought happily, scrutinising it from his corner.

'What are you gawping at?' His uncle's voice snapped him out of his thoughts. 'You look like the angel of death hovering there in the

shadows. Get out and let me do my business in peace.'

'But you need a witness, Uncle,' said Morton.

'Out!' bellowed his uncle, breaking into a violent cough.

Morton bowed and turned to leave, a quiet smile on his face.

He did not go downstairs, but remained at the door with his ear pressed to the crack he had left ajar. His uncle recovered. It sounded as though the lawyer had given him a drink to soothe his coughing. His uncle groaned, then said wearily, 'Oh, that my grandson lived. It galls me to leave everything to that boy. He has all the snivelling ways of my sister and all the greedy ways of his father. Ruined my sister, the scoundrel. Married her for her money and spent it all. To think that it should be their son that gets everything. It's a travesty, Lingham. A bitter travesty.'

'Excuse me, sir.' Morton jumped guiltily and swung round to meet his uncle's butler.

'What are you doing creeping up on people, you gudgeon!' hissed Morton, closing the door quickly.

'Beg pardon, sir,' said the butler coolly, 'but there is a gentleman asking to see his lordship.'

'Gentleman? Who is it?' Morton positioned himself in front of the door handle so the butler could not go in. 'My uncle is busy. He cannot be disturbed. Who is this fellow? One of the neighbours?'

The butler hesitated. His loyalty was to his master. But the whole of the household knew that Mr Butternock would be the new master soon.

'Well?' demanded Morton, his hands on his hips, his chin raised. 'Who is it?'

'He says, sir...that he is his lordship's *grandson*.'

Morton felt the blood drain from his face. His hands dropped limply to his side. 'His *what*?'

'His *grandson*, sir.'

Morton's mind scrambled to recover. 'It can't be,' he said faintly. 'It can't be,' he said more firmly. 'My uncle's grandson is long dead. It's an imposter! I will deal with it.' He pushed past the butler, then whirled round again. 'Not a word of this, Canning,' he ordered. 'Not a word to anyone. I won't have my uncle upset. He's a very sick man. Do you hear?'

Canning looked uncertain and did not immediately answer. Morton stepped up to him so that he was inches from the middle-aged butler's face. 'If you breathe a word of this to anyone, I will turn you off these premises the minute I take possession of them. And I will make sure that no one in all of England ever employs you. Understand?'

Again, Canning hesitated. Finally, he said in a stony voice, 'I shall not trouble the master with family matters. I shall leave them in your

hands, sir.'

Morton searched the butler's face for any sign of concealed rebellion. He knew how loyal his uncle's servants were to him. He added for good measure, 'I will say you swindled away my uncle's money.' That got the desired effect. Canning gave a little gasp. 'I'll have you hauled into court,' Morton added. 'The magistrate will do whatever I pay them to. Understand?'

'Yes, sir,' was the shaky reply.

'Now, where is this fraudster?'

'In the library, sir.'

'Has anyone else heard his ridiculous claim?'

'No, sir.'

Morton thought hard. It might be better if he did not have direct dealings with whomever this person was. He swung back to the butler. 'Tell him his grandfather wants nothing to do with him. Tell him he was cast off when his mother ran off with a foreigner. Tell him that even if this fellow *is* the long-lost grandson, which he most certainly is *not*, he's long since been disinherited. He has no place in this family. No one wants any dealings with him. Tell him all that, and if he makes any fuss or raises a rumpus and refuses to leave, have him forcibly removed by the gamekeeper. At gun point.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Quick about it, man!'

Morton followed the butler down the stairs, then watched from the top of the first-floor landing, leaning over the bannisters to catch sight of the interloper when he was ejected from the library and out of the front door. He heard raised voices; the door soon opened and a slim man wearing a long, sodden travelling coat emerged into the hall, put a dripping hat on his head and cast a parting look at the gloomy interior. He shrugged back his shoulders as if trying to throw off some unwanted feeling and stepped out into a dreary shower. Morton had not seen the stranger's face but could tell by his posture and movement that he was young. The door was closed with a dull thud.

'Canning!' Morton hissed from the top of the stairs.

'Sir?' Canning appeared, looking up with a miserable expression.

'Follow him. Find out where he's going.'

'On foot, sir?'

Canning was not a young man. He could not keep up with the youth who had just left the house. 'Oh, I'll go myself,' Morton muttered, jogging down the stairs. 'Fetch my boots and coat and send for a horse to be saddled.'

It seemed to take forever for the butler and the stable hand to carry out these instructions. Morton was seething with impatience by the time he set off at a canter down the drive. He followed the only

main road all the way to the village where the fraudster must have come from, but could see no sign of anyone. He was wet through by the time he reached the village inn, only to find that no one had seen anything of a young man in a woollen greatcoat. Perhaps the fellow Mr. Butternock was looking for had come via the mail coach, was the innkeeper's suggestion, in which case he would have set off from The White Hart on the coaching road. Morton growled at this, cursing himself for not thinking of this obvious fact in the first place as he set off to The White Hart.

The landlord of this establishment said a young man had arrived on the mail coach asking for directions to Eastersham Park. He'd not seen him return, but he must have called back, for he'd reclaimed the luggage left in safekeeping.

'And where did he go when he had recovered his luggage?' Morton demanded. 'Was he on foot? Did another coach go through?'

'Cannot say,' said the landlord, mirroring Morton's haughty countenance. 'I told you I didn't see the fellow. I'm a busy man, can't be everywhere at once. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've the express coming in any minute.'

'Bah,' spat Morton, vexed by his failure to ascertain the whereabouts of a man who might be a danger to his interests if left at large. A man who might ruin everything. He asked every member of staff he could find, oblivious to the fact that his overbearing manner did not earn him compliance, but defiance. Had he smoothed the servants' palms with coin, he might have got some answers; but he was too mean and out of pocket for such generosity. No one saw anything. No one heard anything, no one knew anything, and he left in a black cloud metaphorically and literally, as the skies further darkened above him.

He spent the evening with his feet in a hot mustard bath, for his wet ride had brought on a cold. He brooded while nursing a glass of his uncle's best port, musing over what he should do next. He was due to travel to London after this dutiful visit. He'd ordered a whole new wardrobe in readiness for his first season in high society. The cost of it was eye-watering, but it was all on credit. He was bargaining everything on his uncle's demise occurring before the London season was over so he could settle his debts, old and new. He was going to look for a wife. Now that his inheritance was well within his grasp, every debutante in town would trip over themselves to catch him and become the next Lady Lansdowne. Whoever this prodigal grandson was, the last place he would turn up was among the high society of London. He would give his uncle's butler stiff instructions on banishing the upstart if he should dare show his face again at Eastersham.

He would go to London, enjoy the attentions of all the silly debs, and pick out the wealthiest one on offer. Uncle Mort couldn't hold out much longer, and it would suit Morton very well to have the excuse of being in mourning to cry off from a big wedding. Society weddings were stupidly dull and expensive. Eastersham village church would do. Immediate family only. And being an orphan and only child meant he didn't have to trouble himself with toadying family members on his side grasping at his newly inherited money.

He looked about the dark panelled walls of the sitting room and thought of all the changes he would make to this gloomy old Tudor pile. He would get his portrait done and put it on the far wall. He would get lots of portraits painted, one for every reception room. He would boot out all his uncle's staff and bring in smart footmen in liveries, a French chef, and a proper valet to replace that half-witted numskull who currently did his bidding.

Such thoughts cheered him no end. He finished his glass, then consolidated his pleasure by abusing his valet-cum-general lackey when he went up to bed, knocking him about the head with a book for not heating the bedpan enough and sending him up and down the stairs until one in the morning for hot milk and honey, possets for his cold, lavender wraps for his head, and to empty his chamber pot twice.



HENRY HAD the length of a miserable journey to consider the cruel blow he had suffered. His grandfather wanted nothing to do with him. So that was what his mother meant when she said she had no family; she meant she had none who wanted her.

He was on the back of a delivery cart, his portmanteau beside him. His coat was damp from the day's rain. He was cold, and he was broke, having given his last piece of silver to the driver to take him the twelve miles to London. He had no clue what he was going to do in London; instinct drove him there, for he knew it was the one place where he would find fellow emigres. He had a sudden longing for the familiar, to hear his native language spoken, to be among those who would understand what it felt like to be a stranger in a foreign land with no place to call home.

It was late afternoon when the cart crossed over the River Thames, setting Henry down in a busy road in an area called Covent Garden. 'That way to Soho,' the driver said, pointing east. 'Plenty of Frenchies there.'

Henry's blind hope was to find someone with enough patriotism and kindness to give him shelter for the night and put him in the way of finding work. He would knock on every tailor and modiste's shop door in the city if he had to. 'Don't go through Seven Dials,' the driver warned, looking at Henry's damp, but well-cut coat and fashionable beaver hat. 'You'll lose the clothes off yer back and be lucky if that were all you lost. Go through Leicester Square and keep to the main road. Only half a mile.'

Henry thanked him, dragged his portmanteau down and stood for a minute looking about him at the bustle and noise and dirt that was a London street. He set off, but found it hard to negotiate his way in the gathering gloom while carrying his heavy case. He knew he must have taken a wrong turn after walking for a half hour; it did not take a half hour to walk a half mile. 'Excuse me, sir,' he said to a passing man. 'Am I in Leicester Square?'

The man strode by, but called back gruffly, 'Trafalgar.'

Henry wandered on, asking for directions and being mostly ignored. A young man strolling along in a gaudy but expensive greatcoat with at least eight capes on it cheerfully gave him detailed directions of how to get to Soho, and Henry followed them faithfully, but after another half hour of traipsing the streets and finding a sign saying 'Piccadilly' he concluded the young man had been having some

sport with him.

His arms were aching from lugging his case so far, and he had not eaten since the meal of bread and cheese in the coaching inn many hours ago. He turned onto a quieter side road and sat down on his case for a minute in the shadow of an alleyway, his head hanging down over his knees as he weighed up his circumstances. This was turning out to be a disaster. Perhaps he should have stayed in France. His foolish impulse to leave had only brought him to this place of misery. How could he have cast off all his usual pragmatism for some romantic notion of finding family who would open their arms to him?

He heard footsteps and looked up. A lady, veiled and wrapped in a dark shawl, was hurrying past the entrance to the alley. She glanced behind her, made a little squeak and broke into a run, stumbling a little on the uneven path. A second person with a heavier step appeared – a man in a dirty coat and a battered hat who lumbered after the lady. Henry, knowing something was wrong, jumped up, just as the man grasped the lady's shoulder. She gave a cry as he yanked her backwards.

'Give over yer purse!' growled the man.

Henry threw himself at the man's back, surprising him into releasing his prey. He gripped the assailant round the neck, feeling as though he had caught a lion by the tail – if he let go, he would have to face the teeth on the other end.

He glanced up to see if the woman had made her escape, and she had, but that glance cost him his hold on the ruffian. It only took the villain a moment to ram Henry against the brick wall of the alley, knocking his breath from him. Now Henry was on the ground being pummelled and sworn at and kicked. He was busily engaged in grabbing at the man's ankle to keep him from landing another kick, when a great whacking noise sounded, and the man above him stopped moving, his snarling face melting into a look of surprise before he collapsed to the ground.

'I haven't killed him, have I?' cried a voice. The veiled lady stood with a raised umbrella in her hands.

Henry saw the man's leg twitch. 'No, ma'am, the brute yet lives. But what a blow!' He got up with a groan, tugging down his ruined coat, which had suffered as much as his ribs and head in the brawl.

'It has an iron handle,' the lady said, her voice trembling. 'It is dreadfully heavy, but I dare not go out without something useful in case such a thing as this—' She broke off and burst into tears.

'Let's get away before he revives,' Henry suggested, as the man gave a moan.

'Oh, yes. I am dreadfully late.' She wiped her eyes firmly. 'I *must* go.'

Henry staggered to where his portmanteau sat and gathered it up, feeling badly shaken. He had not had a mill with anyone since he was twelve years old and he'd pounced on Paul Bruneau, bloodying his nose and wringing his fat neck for mocking the fate of Henry's father. He thought the lady had hurried away, but she was in the street, visibly trembling beneath her swathe of woollen shawl. She gripped her umbrella in one hand, held an empty basket on her arm, and a crumpled black thing in the other hand.

'Can I escort you home, ma'am?' he said, wondering as he said the words how much farther he could walk bearing his heavy case. He longed for warmth and food and wine and a bed so very much.

She held out the crumpled black item to him, and he gave a sigh of regret as he realised it was his hat.

'Oh, you're hurt!' she said, as he drew near enough to reclaim his sorry chapeau. She pointed to his forehead, and he touched it, wincing at the tender spot. The wound felt damp, and there was blood on his fingers.

'You must come with me and have it seen to,' she said. 'And your coat must be cleaned. It is only a short distance, only two streets away. Let me help you with that case.' And she took up one of the leather handles of his portmanteau. He was too weary to argue, so he took the other handle and between them they picked their way along, turning into cleaner streets where lamplighters were busy at work.

'This is your house?' Henry asked, as they approached a mansion of light stone with six scrubbed steps leading up to the front door.

'It's where I work,' she said, releasing the handle of his case. She put her foot on the first step, then halted so abruptly that Henry, who was feeling a little dazed from the blow to his head, bumped into the back of her. He made an 'Oof,' of pain, as his bruised forehead hit her shoulder.

'Oh, I am dreadfully sorry!' she exclaimed, whirling round. She was close enough for him to see her eyes through the fine netting of her veil. 'It's just that I'm uncertain if I should take you through the front entrance or go discreetly round the back. I don't wish to insult you by taking you through the servants' entrance, sir, but...' she made a little apologetic shrug, 'but it would raise so many awkward questions if I were to come through the front at this hour. I am dreadfully late, you see, and you are a strange man, and if they knew I had...' Her excuses trailed away.

'I take no offence at going round the back,' he assured her, and it was the truth. All he cared about at that moment was to sit down somewhere quiet and recover. 'I am in need of rest, ma'am,' he added, 'and a little nourishment before I go on my way, if that is possible.'

'Oh, of course! How dreadfully thoughtless I am. Please, I beg you,

come this way.' She stepped down into the street, picked up the handle of his case again, and pointed to a side entrance of the house. But they had only taken one step before the front door above them opened and an oddly accented footman called out, 'Miss Dymond, is that you?'

The lady halted a second time. 'We shall have to go through the main entrance after all,' she said apologetically. She lowered her voice to say to him, 'Please don't be offended if Mrs Tandy says anything vulgar. I assure you she is very good. Leave your case here. Symes will carry it.'

Henry had not time to enquire who Mrs Tandy was before Miss Dymond marched up the stairs, calling to the footman to run down and fetch the luggage. The footman cast a curious look at Henry in passing, but did as Miss Dymond bid, saying loudly that Madam was in the saloon.

They stepped into a large, square entrance hall where Miss Dymond hastily removed her veil and shawl to reveal a slim figure in a plain gown of dark blue cotton. Her brown hair was scraped back into a bun, and she wore no adornment.

'Would you be very shocked if I were to *downplay* what happened?' she whispered.

He blinked, not familiar with the English word "downplay".

'It is just,' she whispered again, 'that if they knew what really happened, and how dreadful the attack was, I should never be permitted to go out again alone.'

'And nor should you,' Henry pointed out politely.

She flushed. 'I was delayed,' she said. 'I am not usually so late. But it's very important that I be allowed some freedom. I only get one afternoon a fortnight off, you see.'

He did not see; he only knew that he was exhausted. He would humour the lady. 'As I saw tonight's incident, ma'am, you aided *me* from a violent attack.'

'Yes, yes,' she whispered enthusiastically. 'That is just the way to put it, you are *very* kind!'

'And I have a bad head and a dreadful thirst, ma'am,' he appealed.

'Oh, I am so selfish! I shall go up directly. Follow me. Only wait until I have announced you.' She drew herself up tall and marched across the entrance hall, up the stairs to the first floor, and opened a gilded door.

'Laura!' bellowed a voice. 'Is that you? La, child, where have you been? I imagined you lying in the gutter, or drowned in the river, or run over in the street! I sent Symes out an age ago, you naughty girl! Tiffany is in a dreadful state. How can she go to the theatre tonight if you are drowned or trampled flat?'

‘I beg your pardon, Mrs Tandy,’ said Miss Dymond. ‘As you see, I am quite well. But I did find myself in a circumstance of a most unusual nature, a most dreadful drama.’

‘What circumstance?’ cried the voice of Mrs Tandy.

‘What drama?’ said another voice, a younger, sweeter tone.

‘A man—’ began Miss Dymond.

‘La, a man!’ exclaimed Mrs Tandy.

‘Oh, do tell,’ cried the young voice.

‘I met a man being assaulted,’ Miss Dymond said, ‘and, only think of it, I *hit* the man, not the man being assaulted, but his assailant, I *hit* him with my umbrella and he fell down, and it was most dreadful!’

‘You knocked down a man in the street?’ cried Mrs Tandy.

‘Laura, how brave and how *awful*,’ cried the younger voice.

‘And the, the man...’ stammered Miss Dymond, as she delivered the dramatic conclusion, ‘is *here*.’

‘The assailant?’ cried Mrs Tandy.

‘No, no! The poor man who was assaulted. He needs his head seeing to. I could not just leave him in the street.’ She beckoned to Henry to come forward. He winced on entry at the bright lights of the lamps and chandeliers.

‘You brought a man off the streets into our house?’ exclaimed the younger voice. ‘Oh,’ she continued, ‘look at his clothes.’

‘Ripped and dirty,’ observed Mrs Tandy.

‘But of excellent cut, Mama. He is not a *man*, he is a *gentleman*.’

‘With kennel filth and blood all over his face.’

‘Shall I take him to another room?’ Miss Dymond offered. ‘And call for Mrs Sedgemoor to bring water and bandages? I think I ought to send for Dr Barnes, also. What do you suggest, ma’am?’

Henry forced a polite bow in the direction of the voice of Mrs Tandy. He was having trouble seeing her with his eyes screwed up against the light. ‘I beg your pardon, madam...’ he began as he bowed, but the movement made his head spin.

‘Oh, the poor man looks fit to swoon,’ said the sweet voice.

‘Put him by the fire, Laura,’ ordered Mrs Tandy. ‘Ring the bell, Tiffany. Call for brandy.’

Henry was ushered to a wing-backed chair where he sank down gratefully. A bustle of ministrations began as he was given water, then brandy, then the gash on his head was bathed with something that stung. He heard Mrs Tandy ordering the sweet-voiced Tiffany from the room, saying she ought not to be witnessing such a thing, and sweet Tiffany replied that it was the most interesting thing that had happened all week, and she was not going to miss out on it.

After a reviving biscuit and a second glass of brandy, which was not Cognac, but passable enough to warm him and dull his pain,

Henry was able to look round at his three lady benefactresses and speak.

‘Madam, thank you for aiding this poor Samaritan,’ he said, addressing Mrs Tandy. She was a middle-aged lady, with square shoulders and a broad face, dressed in an old-fashioned round gown of yellow striped chintz. Yellow was not her colour, was Henry’s first thought. And such a buxom lady ought never to wear horizontal stripes. ‘You are an angel of mercy,’ he added, exerting himself to make her his most charming smile, the one which all his matronly clients at Madame Bruneau’s appreciated – a heady mix of boyish appeal with a gleam of admiration.

Mrs Tandy proved to be no less susceptible to him than any other woman. Her face softened, and she smiled in reply, her smile stretching wide on her genial face.

‘Your name, sir?’ she enquired, tilting her head coquettishly.

He was about to say *Monsieur Bruneau*, but caught himself. ‘Henry Brown at your service, ma’am,’ he said, adding with another gallant smile, ‘and in your debt forever.’

‘Ahem,’ said the sweet voice of the young lady. ‘Mama,’ she prompted.

Mrs Tandy recalled herself, nodding to her right and saying, ‘My daughter, Theodosia.’

Henry turned in his chair to view the daughter, and his breath caught in his throat. He had never seen such perfectly symmetrical features. Large blue eyes, impossibly long lashes, a perfect cupid bow for lips. He had heard of the *English rose*, but now he had met that paragon of fair beauty. Her pale pink muslin did not do her justice. It was adorned with too many bows and too many frills at the neckline. Such beauty needed no adornment. She only required a perfect bias cut and the true grace of a Grecian gown. A goddess did not need ribbons.

‘Your devoted servant, Miss Theodosia,’ he said, all his admiration in his eyes and voice.

She gave a pretty laugh at his expression. ‘Call me Tiffany,’ she said. ‘No one calls me Theodosia, thank goodness. And of course, you have met my companion.’ Tiffany tilted her perfect head of fair ringlets to acknowledge Miss Dymond, who had taken the seat beside her on the Rococo style couch.

Miss Dymond looked startlingly plain in her serviceable, long-sleeved gown beside the gauzy muslin of Miss Tiffany Tandy with her soft shawl of pink and white Kashmir silk draped over her shoulders.

‘Very glad to make your formal acquaintance, Miss Dymond,’ said Henry, giving her a genuine smile with no gilded charm. ‘A true heroine. Your iron-handled umbrella a weapon such as Britomart

herself could not wield more ably.'

'I am only glad I could assist you, sir,' Miss Dymond assured him.

'But who *are* you?' said Tiffany in her sweet voice. 'I declare, this is quite like a scene from a novel, is it not, Mama? A handsome stranger suddenly appearing in our midst. You sound a little foreign, sir, if I may say so. Are you Italian?'

Henry felt lightheaded from little food and much brandy, and he had to take care both to keep his words from slurring into a strong accent, and to keep from revealing anything he did not wish to be known. He had determined on the long ride into London that he would remain anonymous. Monsieur Bruneau was to be discarded, and Henri, Vicomte de Courtenay, grandson of Lord Lansdowne, was no more.

'Henry Brown, at your service, my lady. I have spent my formative years in France with my uncle. Now I am returned to the land of my mother.'

Tiffany looked disappointed. 'Oh,' she said, sadly. 'I confess I had hoped you were some nobleman escaped from that horrid revolution.'

'And where do you reside, Mr Brown?' Mrs Tandy enquired.

'I was on my way to seek lodgings when the attack occurred, ma'am. When I say I am returned to the land of my mother, I mean that I literally arrived in England two days ago and arrived in London not two hours since.'

'Dr Barnes, ma'am,' announced the footman from the door.

A white-haired physician was welcomed in. A fireside screen was positioned so the doctor could examine the patient without three pairs of curious female eyes watching the procedure.

'Nothing broken,' was the verdict. 'But concussion very likely. He must be supervised for four and twenty hours in case of sickness. Could very well choke in his sleep and die. Hallucinatory malaise is another risk, leading to flights of fancy involving leaping from rooftops and death and bleeding of the brain, with a certain outcome of a swift demise. Light supper. Early night. Four drops in brandy every four hours.' He poured out four drops and administered them, and the glass bottle of *Dr Barnes' Most Efficacious Drops for Purging, Purifying, and Relieving All Known Ailments* was placed ceremoniously in the hands of the patient. 'If you should experience hallucinations or your brain begin to bleed and you fall unconscious, send for me,' he advised. Henry desired to ask how he would know if his brain was bleeding if he were unconscious, but the doctor had departed and now another voice was heard in the hallway. A voice as loud as Mrs Tandy's and as bright as Miss Tiffany's.

'Oh no,' said Tiffany. 'It's Ralph. I thought he was dining out tonight.'

‘Who’s dead?’ bellowed the newcomer, and a young man of about eighteen or nineteen bounded into the room. ‘Can’t be you, Mama, you’re always merry as a grig.’

‘Ralph, don’t talk to Mama like that,’ Tiffany scolded, but Mrs Tandy laughed and tugged Ralph by a forelock of his fair hair as he bent down to kiss her cheek.

‘Not the hair, Ma!’ Ralph cried, darting to an enormous mirror on an adjacent wall to rearrange his artful tousles. On turning round, he spied Henry, who had been shielded from view by the wings of his chair.

‘I say, who’s this?’ cried Ralph. ‘Pon rep, that’s a smart painted peeper!’

Henry looked blankly back at the fop in the appalling outfit. Red and blue striped waistcoat, canary yellow breeches, and a spotted cravat! Was the youth off to a masquerade as a circus clown? And what language was he speaking?

‘Don’t talk slang, Ralph,’ said Tiffany. ‘Mama, tell him to talk like a gentleman. We have company.’

‘One of yours, Sis?’ said Ralph, still regarding Henry. He bounded across the room, thrusting out a hand. ‘Ralph Tandy, who are you?’

‘Henry Brown,’ said Henry, wincing at the volume of the young man’s voice while shaking his hand.

‘Where did you get that painted peeper?’ Ralph enquired.

‘Don’t speak to him,’ Tiffany said. ‘He was horribly set upon, as if you couldn’t tell by his poor black eye. Laura hit the villain on the head with her umbrella and brought Mr Brown here for assistance. We are to feed him a light supper and put him to bed. Dr Barnes said so.’

‘So that’s what the old quack was here for,’ said Ralph. He turned back to Henry. ‘S’pose he left you one of his bottles of cure-all? Don’t take a drop of it. Sets your bowels all to flinders, I can tell you from experience.’

‘Ralph, must you be so crude?’ protested Tiffany. ‘Tell him to behave, Mama.’

‘Do I speak truth, Mama?’ hollered Ralph.

‘To be sure,’ agreed Mrs Tandy. ‘Nothing like Dr Barnes’ drops for moving things along.’

‘Oh, Mama!’ groaned Tiffany. Miss Dymond exchanged sympathetic looks with her companion.

‘Dinner is served, ma’am,’ announced the butler, an enormous man, shaped like a barrel, but with small, nimble feet enabling him to glide across the room to throw back the double doors between the saloon and the dining room. A scruffy terrier came in with the butler, trotting at his heels.

‘Thank you, Grouse,’ Mrs Tandy replied.

‘Thank goodness,’ said Ralph, bounding back to his mother’s side to offer her his arm. ‘I’m deuced hungry.’

‘Ralph, you’re not dressed,’ protested Tiffany. ‘Mama, don’t let that dog sit up next to you.’

‘Mama ain’t dressed,’ argued Ralph. ‘Don’t be so top-lofty, Sis.’

‘We have a guest,’ said Tiffany pointedly.

‘He ain’t dressed neither,’ said Ralph.

‘Oh, Tiffany, ’tis only a family supper,’ said Mrs Tandy. ‘And Floss is very prettily behaved. Do you like dogs, Mr Brown?’

‘Who could like a mangy stray thing off the street?’ said Tiffany. ‘Is it any wonder we don’t get invited anywhere?’ Her beautiful eyes sparkled prettily with tears of vexation. ‘We are *heathens*.’

‘I think Mr Brown ought to have a tray sent up to the guest room,’ suggested Miss Dymond as Henry struggled to his feet.

‘Poor man, we are very rude and thoughtless,’ cried Tiffany. ‘Ralph, help Mr Brown up to the guest room this minute. You’re supposed to be the man of the house when Papa’s away, now *act* like it.’

‘Keep your wig on, Sis,’ said Ralph. ‘I weren’t to know the poor fellow ain’t dining with us.’

‘You know I don’t wear a wig, you odious dribble.’

‘Hah! Now who’s talking slang?’

‘You are a horrible brother. Now see Mr Brown to the guest room and make sure he is very comfortable.’

‘I will make up a tray for him,’ said Miss Dymond. ‘I shall send it up directly. Good night, Mr Brown.’

‘Good night, Mr Brown!’ called Mrs Tandy. ‘Such a pity you aren’t up to dining – a nice saddle of mutton too. You must stay to dinner tomorrow. We shall play cards after. And Laura can play you something cheerful on the piano. We’ll have lobster. Do you like piquet?’

‘Good night, mesdames, and thank you,’ was all the reply Henry had energy for. He thought the drops Dr Barnes had dosed him with must be taking effect, for his stomach was gurgling alarmingly, and he made all haste to leave.



‘SHALL we peep in and have a look at our mysterious man?’ Tiffany said with a giggle. She and Laura reached the top of the staircase on their way to Tiffany’s dressing room.

‘Certainly not,’ said Laura, who was close behind. ‘Let the poor man sleep.’

‘Dr Barnes said he was to be supervised for four-and-twenty hours,’ argued Tiffany.

‘Which is why Mrs Sedgemoor is taking a turn in sitting with him,’ replied Laura.

They reached Tiffany’s rooms where a fire danced, and the lamps were all lit. Tiffany needed as much light as possible when she was dressing.

Laura automatically began the preparations, lighting the spirit stove for the heated tongs, then laying out Tiffany’s clothes. She would wear her newest gown tonight, a frothy confection of amethyst muslin and lace. Laura wished Mrs Tandy would employ a proper lady’s maid for Tiffany; she felt inadequate, never having curled her own hair or worn a fashionable gown herself. As companion-cum-lady’s maid, she was to be ever present yet invisible, which suited her most of the time. There were the occasional hours of madness when she longed to break free of her confines and run away and do something grand and exciting, but she had Fred to think of. She scolded herself that she was a very lucky young lady. Though the Tandys were not exactly good ton, they were respectable and generous, and did not have the insufferable airs that some of the rich carried. They treated her quite like one of the family. What would happen to Laura when Tiffany made her match and went off to a new marital home was the most worrisome thought in Laura’s mind. She would never find a position quite like this one, and what would happen to poor Fred if there were any lapse in her wages?

‘Shall I wear rubies or sapphires?’ Tiffany enquired. ‘Which go best with my gown?’

‘The sapphires complement your eyes,’ Laura suggested.

‘But the rubies give me colour. Oh, I shall wear them both! Mama says I should wear as many jewels as possible.’

Laura did not consider Mrs Tandy a good arbiter of what her daughter should do in society. Mrs Tandy believed that the way for her daughter to catch a good husband was by displaying Tiffany’s beauty and wealth to the extreme. It was true, however, that beauty

and wealth were two things that Tiffany had in abundance.

'Loop my ringlets up on the top,' Tiffany directed, demonstrating before the mirror. 'I saw Lady Muir wearing her hair just so at the theatre. Isn't it a pity that Mr Brown should be Mr *Brown*?'

'What do you mean?' Laura's speech was muffled by the hairpins in her mouth.

'Well, *Brown*. Such a commonplace name. He looks too dashing to be a Mr *Brown*. He should be a Lord Somebody-or-other; he has the looks, don't you think?'

'If a black eye and a bandaged temple are the looks of a lord,' said Laura, pushing the last of the pins into place.

'*Ouch*,' squeaked Tiffany.

'Sorry, dear,' said Laura, hastening to loosen the offending pin. 'Is that better?'

'Did you see him?' said Tiffany, turning her head slowly from side to side that she might see how her ringlets fell. 'In the fight?'

'It was hardly a fight. Poor Mr Brown was set upon in a horrible way. He was very brave, but one can see by looking at him that he is no street brawler.'

Tiffany sighed. 'If he had been a lord, he would be trained in fencing and boxing.'

'Well, I was most grateful to him,' said Laura, forgetting that she was supposed to be the rescuer, not the other way round.

'And why?' said Tiffany, her eyes narrowing. 'You said he was the one being attacked.'

'And he was.' Laura coloured a little. 'But it was rather frightening a scene to come upon. I was glad of his escort home.'

'You ought not to have been out on your own,' said Tiffany. 'Where do you go on your afternoons off?' The blue eyes narrowed again as she watched Laura in the mirror. 'You are very secretive sometimes.'

'Shall you wear your silver shawl?' said Laura, turning away.

'I know you are changing the subject.' Tiffany turned her attention back to herself. 'He has the voice of a lord,' she mused. 'A very nice voice. And he says pretty things. I wish Ralph would talk nicely and say pretty things instead of dreadful slang. It's very disagreeable to have a brother who thinks himself a regular blade when really he is a regular greenhorn.'

Laura forbore to point out that Tiffany was using some of her brother's "dreadful" expressions herself.

'Papa would be shocked to hear Ralph talking so,' continued Tiffany. 'He would say he was a peacock.' She took up a white peahen feather and held it up against the side of her head. 'Shall I wear feathers or flowers?'

'I think the lily-of-the-valley,' suggested Laura, picking out the

most discreet of Tiffany's selection of silk flowers. She held the spray of delicate flowers up to Tiffany's fair bunch of curls.

'I think the feather also,' said Tiffany. 'I saw Lady Euphemia, the Countess of Aylesbury's daughter, wearing white feathers at the musicale last week. Do you think I will ever be introduced to her?' She sighed, not expecting an answer. 'Her brother looks very aristocratic, and is quite one of the catches of the season, so the talk goes.'

'By aristocratic you mean he looks as though he has just smelled something bad,' Laura could not resist saying.

'That is how one is supposed to look,' said Tiffany, practising a haughty stare in the glass. 'One is supposed to look bored and languid. They all look like that. Mr Brown has not that look, has he? Nor does Ralph. At least Mr Brown does not grin like an inane monkey as Ralph does.'

'Ralph does not grin like a monkey,' Laura objected gently. 'He is young and high-spirited, is all. I would sooner have your brother's nonsense than a cold-eyed gentleman such as you have described.'

'Well, it does not signify,' said Tiffany with another sigh, getting up from her dressing table chair. 'For I never do meet with any haughty gentlemen. I only get to meet commonplace ones. I shall never find an eligible duke.'

'There are no eligible dukes in London,' said Laura, who read the society columns along with Tiffany and Mrs Tandy. 'None under the age of sixty.'

'I would make do with an earl,' said Tiffany, slipping her stockinged feet into her delicate pumps of lilac silk. 'Or even a baron. I wonder if that Mr Butternock will show up this season. Everyone is talking of him. He's said to be quite handsome, as well as the heir to a lord. He will be ever so rich when his uncle dies, and his uncle is said to be at death's door.'

'Which scent?' Laura enquired, holding up two bottles, one in each hand.

'*Love in Idleness*,' said Tiffany. 'No, *Mademoiselle*. Shall I wear both?'

'That might be a tad overpowering.'

'But it would be a whole new fragrance,' said Tiffany, liking this idea. 'A little *Love* on the wrists, and the *Mademoiselle* on my temples and neck.'

'The pearl fan or your new bird of paradise one?' Laura held up a pair of fans. 'You cannot carry both,' she said, as Tiffany looked indecisively between them.

'Of course I shan't carry both. What a silly notion.' The new fan, painted with a riot of colourful birds, was plucked from Laura's hand. 'How do I look?' Tiffany made a slow twirl.

‘Expensive,’ said Laura.

‘Good.’ Tiffany tripped to the door. ‘I hope Ralph hasn’t drunk too much since dinner. His language gets worse when he’s tipsy. Are you sure you are not disappointed at not coming tonight? You may come if you wish?’

‘I’m sure.’ Laura followed her into the hall. ‘You don’t need me with your brother in attendance. I’ve had enough excitement for one day. A quiet evening will suit me very well.’ Laura really did feel fatigued after the day she had had. Seeing Frederick always left her in low spirits, and to have had that dreadful man drag her into that alleyway had been terrifying.

Tiffany paused before descending the stairs. ‘Do you know,’ she said conspiratorially, ‘I *shall* peep in at Mr Brown before I go. Just to see how he does.’ And she tripped down the hall to the guest rooms.

Mr Brown was sleeping peacefully. Mrs Sedgemoor, the housekeeper, was dozing over her knitting in a chair. The two young ladies stood at the bedside, peering at the slumbering face of the gentleman by the light of the bedside candles.

‘He’s quite handsome,’ whispered Tiffany.

Laura agreed, but felt it was not quite the thing for them to be gazing down on the sleeping man. ‘We must not wake him,’ she whispered, tugging at Tiffany’s arm to pull her away.

‘Oh, you’re awake,’ said Tiffany in a soft voice. Mr Brown’s eyelids had lifted. At first he looked alarmed, as though he did not know where he was. Then his gaze rested on Tiffany, who stood with one hand holding the bed post, her fair skin like pearl against the royal blue of the bed curtain.

‘I must be having the most delightful dream,’ he said. ‘A fairy princess at my bedside. Did you kiss me awake?’

Tiffany laughed softly. ‘I think you are having one of those hallucinations Dr Barnes warned of.’

‘No. It is too pleasant a vision to be the result of a sick mind.’

‘We must let Mr Brown rest,’ urged Laura, thinking that this bedside flirting was very inappropriate.

‘Are you away to a royal ball?’ Mr Brown said.

‘Only the theatre,’ said Tiffany, patting her hair to check that her feather was still in place.

The movement showed a length of bare arm, the skin fair and smooth between the top of her gloves and the bottom of her little puff sleeves. Mr Brown’s eyes followed the movement with a dreamy expression. He sniffed. ‘What fragrance is that?’

‘Do you like it?’ Tiffany said, touching her neck where she had liberally applied the Mademoiselle.

He only smiled gently.

‘Your brother is waiting downstairs,’ Laura said, feeling unaccountably vexed at the caressing look Mr Brown was now bestowing on Tiffany’s perfect neck. ‘Good night, Mr Brown,’ said Laura, a little curtly. ‘Come Tiffany.’

‘Sweet dreams,’ whispered Tiffany.

‘They shall be,’ promised Mr Brown.

HENRY DID NOT IMMEDIATELY SINK into sweet dreams. The overpowering cloud of scent Miss Tandy had brought into the room offended his refined sense of smell, and he tossed and turned a little, trying to escape the cloying sweetness. She was an angel to behold, but she wore her gloves all wrong; evening gloves ought to be artfully ruched between the elbow and wrist, and that lovely neck of hers ought not to be ornamented like a jeweller’s shop in great blowsy rubies, clashing with sapphires the size of grapes. And to mix feathers with flowers was a travesty of good taste, and silk flowers no less. Miss Dymond’s simplicity was far easier on the eye.

He closed his eyes, imagining the gown he would design for Miss Tiffany Tandy were he in his workshop in France. Thoughts of cloud-like chiffon floated agreeably before him; Chantilly lace, fine as a dew-laden cobweb, tiny seed pearls, glowing soft as moonlight, silver silk thread, a gown fit for a fairy princess...such thoughts lulled him back to sleep.



DR BARNES WAS SUMMONED next day and pronounced the patient safely preserved from an untimely death. His patented drops had worked wonders once again.

Henry was feeling much better after a long sleep and breakfast in bed, but his body still ached, and his head felt tender. When Mrs Tandy bustled into the bedroom in tartan silk he did not argue with her assertion that he would dine with them that evening and stay another night. He could not have argued with Mrs Tandy even if he wished to, for he was too distracted in marvelling that silk could be bought in purple and green check to say anything other than 'Yes, ma'am.'

When she had gone, he considered what he would do on the morrow when he must leave this comfortable house and make his way as a stranger without money. Perhaps Mrs Tandy might know of the reputable tailors and Mantua-makers in the city, but then he recalled her son's garish spotted cravat and her purple tartan, and even her exquisite daughter's fussy ribbons, and concluded that Mrs Tandy and her family had no clue where to find excellent tailoring and couture.

But even if his kind hostess knew nothing of fashion, he would do her the courtesy of presenting himself at her dinner table in his usual immaculate style. His clothes from the previous day had been laundered and an attempt made to sew up the tear in his shirt. He retrieved his sewing case from his portmanteau and pulled a chair to the window to unpick the repair and do it properly. Stitches must be invisible; the shirt would be good as new once it had been pressed properly.

He unpacked his clothes, grieved to see the rumples and creases. They were gently removed, examined as a mother would examine her baby, and hung about the room that they might air. Mrs Tandy had kindly said he could ring the bell in his room to call for anything he needed, so he called for a pair of flatirons.

The housemaids who brought the irons and board and jug of water asked what it was he needed pressing. The maids' eyes widened at the sight of him sitting at the window with needle and thread in his long fingers, and their mouths fell open when he calmly informed them he would do his own ironing, and called for starch. They left the room whispering that it must be what foreigners did, but who ever heard of a gent doing his own ironing?

He left his bedchamber washed, shaved, delicately scented from

his little bottle of French *Lavande*, and dressed in biscuit-coloured breeches, white stockings, a waistcoat of slate blue with elegant embroidery, and a starched cravat, beautifully tied. His box-coat was in that shade of crème caramel which he knew suited his colouring very well, bringing out the tawny lights in his brown eyes and hair. He felt more like his real self again now that he was clean and his attire was faultless. He made his way down to the saloon, where the family gathered before dinner.

The door to the saloon was open; Mrs Tandy's voice vied with that of her son's as they talked over one another. Ralph Tandy was recounting a famous set down he had given to some personage at the theatre last night. Henry stood just beyond the doorway, adjusting his cuffs and waiting for a pause in the conversation that he might make his appearance without interrupting them.

'A right old crow she looked, Mama,' Ralph was saying.

'It was Lady Greaves,' said Tiffany's voice, sounding troubled.

'Dressed in black with black feathers an' all. Who goes to the theatre in black, I ask you?'

'She is a widow,' Tiffany said. 'And a very wealthy one. And very influential.'

'She said to some dowd next to her—'

'A viscountess,' said Tiffany. 'Lady Partington.'

Ralph's voice took on a quavery falsetto at this point in the story. '*Here come those mushrooms, Harriet. Don't let them catch your eye. They'll be after your Cicely and Crispin, I warrant you.* Pair of top-lofty crabs!' cried Ralph. 'Regular tabbies with their claws out!'

'Fie!' cried Mrs Tandy. 'For shame! La! Mushrooms indeed!'

'But you ought not to have told them to their faces that they were spiteful cats,' said Tiffany. 'Everyone heard you. Your voice does carry so, Ralph. *You* should be on the stage.'

'I spoke truth,' said Ralph proudly. 'No one calls my sister a mushroom. As if I would ever look at that Miss *Prissy Cissy*. I saw her standing there, as sour as her mother. And as if you would have that Crispin Partington,' Ralph added. 'Even if he fell on his knees and begged you!'

Ralph snorted his disgust, but Tiffany only remarked dreamily that Crispin Partington did not look sour.

'He might be better looking,' admitted Ralph, 'and a future earl, but they've no money. I hear the father gambled it all away.'

'An earl,' repeated Mrs Tandy with a hint of regret. 'But, we would not let you marry a gambler, my sweet. A real man makes his money work and grow, just as your good papa does.'

'And a real lady,' added Ralph, 'has a sense of humour just as my good mama does. A real lady don't look like she's sucking lemons at

the theatre. And it were a comedy too!’

Mrs Tandy laughed heartily at this, and Henry, deeming this a good time to enter, saw her swatting her son affectionately with her fan while Ralph was pulling a face to show what he meant by lemon-sucking. Henry made his bow to his hostess and kissed her hand as though she were a duchess. He greeted Miss Dymond and Miss Tandy, making a compliment to each, as good manners decreed, and shook hands with Ralph, whose bluff young face grinned back under his foppishly long fringe. Henry was aware that he was being regarded with a deal of admiration, but he was used to inducing this effect.

‘La, you are a treat to look at!’ exclaimed Mrs Tandy. ‘You do scrub up well. How’s your head, my dear?’

‘Much better, ma’am, thanks to your kindness.’

‘Where do you get your clothes?’ Tiffany enquired, looking him up and down appreciatively. ‘Ralph, you must get your clothes made wherever Mr Brown does.’

‘What’s wrong with my togs?’ Ralph demanded, stroking his waistcoat and tinkling the collection of seals and fobs he wore like peddler’s wares. ‘Regular top-of-the-tree fashion. Beau Brummell himself would be hard pressed to find fault with me.’

‘Do you know who Beau Brummell is, Mr Brown?’ It was Miss Dymond who spoke. ‘Does his fame carry across the channel?’

‘I have heard of Mr Brummell,’ said Henry. ‘The English papers mention him frequently in their society columns.’

‘I suppose all your clothes were made in Paris,’ said Tiffany.

‘Not in Paris,’ Henry answered. ‘But in France, yes. In fact, I made them myself.’

‘You made them yourself?’ Tiffany looked disappointed. ‘You are a tailor, then?’

‘I was the chief designer for *La Maison Bruneau*, both for my uncle’s menswear and my aunt’s ladieswear.’

‘But not in Paris,’ said Tiffany sadly.

‘We were to open a shop in Paris. But...my uncle died, and his son decided not to proceed with the plans.’

‘I am sorry,’ said Miss Dymond, who had been listening to this conversation while Mrs Tandy and Ralph resumed talking over one another in a conversation of their own. ‘About your uncle,’ she added. ‘Was it a recent bereavement?’

‘Yes,’ Henry said bluntly, but bowed to show his appreciation of her sympathy.

‘Mama,’ said Tiffany, ‘Mr Brown is a designer of fashion. He was to have a shop in Paris.’

‘Very nice,’ said Mrs Tandy blithely. Henry had already noted Mrs Tandy’s gown: an eye-watering combination of puce green watered

silk with cherry red velvet trimming. Was Mrs Tandy's modiste colour blind? 'I like comfort over fashion myself,' said Mrs Tandy. 'Girls today go out in the skimpiest of things, and in all weathers. In my day, such a bit of muslin would be considered naught but undergarments. And what puzzles me most is that the less material a gown has, the more it costs! Can you explain this, Mr Brown?'

Henry had no opportunity to explain anything of the mysteries of fashion, for the barrel-shaped butler made his dramatic throwing back of the doors, declaring dinner was served. Henry offered his arm to the young ladies, while Ralph took his mother into dinner.

'What is the fashion in Paris this season?' Tiffany enquired, when the soup was served.

'Still very much the long line of skirt, short sleeves with long gloves,' Henry supplied. 'Silk is the favoured fabric, or embroidered cotton. Light colours. The elegance of artful simplicity, Miss Tandy.'

'Artful simplicity?' said Tiffany, looking down at the little bows at her neckline and sleeves, and the ribbons trailing from her shoulders and sewn in a crisscross pattern across her bodice. A look of doubt clouded her lovely face. 'Mr Brown,' she said quietly, leaning very slightly towards him, 'am I...too *fussy*?'

He could not tell her that she looked like a birthday gift, tied up in ribbons and bows, for that would be very rude. He only said, and with the smile he reserved for the clients who needed the right balance of guidance and flattery, 'Your innate elegance ought to be reflected in the elegant lines of your dress, and you, mademoiselle, are blessed with the rarest purity of line. If I were your designer, I should decree that no accoutrements must distract the eye, but the clothes must serve to *present* such natural harmony of form.'

She smiled uncertainly, her smile not quite reaching her eyes, as though she understood that he was complimenting her beauty while at the same time making a careful criticism of her dress. She took a slow sip of her soup as she considered this revelation that she might not be as perfectly presented as she could be.

The soup was removed and the second course brought in while Tiffany discreetly examined Henry's crisp cravat and the smooth fall of his coat, then looked thoughtfully at her brother, seated opposite her, making his mama laugh at his attempt to juggle his peas and catch them in his mouth. Ralph's cravat was his usual spotted design, and his blue coat was padded very high at the shoulders, while his waistcoat had pink parrots embroidered on it. 'Ralph, must you act like a clown from Astley's as well as look like one?' she said, in such a tone of sorrow that he dropped his peas in surprise.

'Lor', Sis, what's with the Methody air? I am a dutiful son, and it is my duty to entertain my mama, is that not so, ma'am?'

Mrs Tandy agreed that it was so. 'Tis only a family supper, Tiffany,' she pointed out. 'We don't stand on ceremony in this house.'

'But we have a guest,' said Tiffany. She pouted a little, putting her knife and fork down as though she had lost her appetite. 'I declare,' she said in a tone unusually serious, 'that we are *not quite the thing*.'

'Not the thing?' mocked Ralph, tossing a pea at his sister. The pea bounced off a tureen and landed with a little plop in Henry's wineglass.

'Furthermore,' she glared at her brother, 'I believe the reason we are not invited anywhere by anyone of good ton, is precisely because we are so very...' her voice wobbled 'so very...*vulgar*.'

'Vulgar?' bellowed Ralph; he began pelting her with peas until his mother stuck the tines of her fork into his hand to jolt him out of his frenzy.

'Yes, *vulgar*,' repeated Tiffany, now with tears in her eyes. 'Look at you, Ralph, you're like a...a performing monkey throwing food about the table dressed like a tulip with pink parrots on your waistcoat. Real gentlemen do not wear parrots on their waistcoats, and real men do not throw peas at the table!'

'They're *flamingoes*,' roared Ralph amiably. 'And real ladies don't go about prosing and giving jaw-me-deads at the dinner table!'

'Real gentlemen don't talk nasty slang in front of ladies,' Tiffany shot back, her usually mild blue eyes flashing like the sapphires in her headdress.

'Really, Tiffany,' protested Mrs Tandy, 'what has come over you tonight? Poor Ralph was only having a little harmless fun.'

'Poor Ralph is acting like an overgrown child,' said Tiffany, her voice choked. 'And he would not dare do so if Papa were here.'

Mrs Tandy did not dispute this, but turned to Miss Dymond for some assistance. 'What is wrong with Tiffany?' she whispered loud enough for all to hear. 'Is it the megrim time of month?'

Tiffany made a little strangled cry at this comment and flushed as scarlet as her brother's flamingos, rising from the table so quickly that the footman had not time to draw her chair for her.

'But where are you going, my lamb?' cried Mrs Tandy.

'Away from this...this *ill-bred*, unrefined, unmannerly table. I will *never* marry a title with such a family!' Tiffany threw down her napkin and made a stately departure.

'What a kick up!' marvelled Ralph. 'Wonder what's got her blood up?'

'Indeed!' gasped Mrs Tandy. 'I haven't seen her in such a pet since, well since that tea party when she was thirteen.' She looked genuinely nonplussed. 'Do you remember, Ralph? You burst in on all her friends —'

‘—With a pair of the gamekeeper’s stoats!’ finished Ralph. He laughed heartily. ‘That was a rum hum, how those girls did squeal, well worth the caning Pa gave me.’

‘I shall go after her,’ said Miss Dymond, who had already put down her napkin after discreetly removing two peas from her neckline.

‘I know what will cheer her up,’ said Mrs Tandy, her face clearing. ‘We’ll all go to Vauxhall tonight. Tell Tiffany,’ she called after Miss Dymond. ‘Tell her I shall put on all my best feathers and jewels just to please her, she won’t be able to call *me* a dowdy, and you will come too, Laura, and tell her Ralph promises to be on his best behaviour, don’t you Ralph?’

Miss Dymond left the room without hearing if Ralph consented to such a promise or not.

‘We’ll have a famous time of it,’ Mrs Tandy continued, beckoning the server to approach with the beef. ‘Mr Brown,’ she waved her fork in his direction, ‘you must come. You’ll be delighted with the fireworks.’

‘And the lady acrobats in their tights,’ said Ralph with a wink.

‘You are most kind to invite me,’ said Henry, ‘but I fear fireworks are not the thing for my head just at this time. When I am fully recovered, I should be pleased to go anywhere that gave you pleasure, ma’am.’

‘I daresay you’re right,’ said Mrs Tandy. ‘They are mortal loud, but very pretty.’ Her face clouded again. ‘I hope it will be the thing to cheer Tiffany. What can have come over her? It was not something you said, was it, Mr Brown? She was talking to you just before she set up a squawk, and I saw she went very quiet and still, as though she were thinking about something, but Tiffany hardly ever thinks.’

Henry was not sure how best to answer this. He would have let it pass without a reply, but Mrs Tandy was looking attentively at him, clearly expecting an answer. Her motherly concern was evident.

‘Miss Tandy and I were discussing fashion, ma’am,’ he said. Mrs Tandy still waited. He chose his words carefully. ‘She wondered how her own fashion compared with that of Paris.’

‘And?’ queried Mrs Tandy. ‘How does it? There can’t be any French duchess more beautiful than my Tiffany.’

‘There aren’t any French duchesses left, Mama,’ drawled Ralph. ‘They did away with them all, didn’t they?’ He drew a forefinger across his throat.

Henry’s jaw tightened at this heedless reference. He had a sudden desire to punch Ralph Tandy on his spoilt nose the way he had punched spoilt little Paul Bruneau once. Instead of his fists, he used his tongue. ‘Miss Tandy is possessed of an astute awareness that the presentation of her family to the fashionable world is a cause of

distress and disadvantage to her.'

'Eh?' said Ralph, looking at his mother for clarification. Mrs Tandy looked as confused as a child, and Henry mastered his anger. He would not insult the lady who had shown him great kindness and hospitality in his hour of need. He reined in his temper and softened his tone. 'Mrs Tandy, may I speak candidly?'

'Speak however you see fit, Mr Brown,' said Mrs Tandy. 'I don't believe in curbing anyone from saying what they think, and I don't stand on ceremony.'

'Admirable qualities, ma'am,' Henry assured her. 'But unfortunately, the world is not as honest and artless as yourself. The world of High Society is very much interested in ceremony and with *not* saying or acting exactly as one wishes, but as one *ought*. The definition of what ought to be said and done being ascertained by society itself.'

Mrs Tandy gave a little shrug. 'I care little for what society thinks, sir. I'm a plain woman.'

'Yet you have raised your children to move in society. You wish them to be in society, am I correct?'

'I wish them to marry as high as they can,' admitted Mrs Tandy. 'That's what we're here for. To do the season, find a good match for my girl and my handsome boy. Not that I want them to go off and leave me, but I do want grandchildren, Mr Brown. And I do want Mr Tandy's hard work in making so much money to go to the next generation and the name of Tandy to carry on.' She smiled fondly at her son.

Ralph returned her smile, but added, 'Plenty of time for me to get leg-shackled, Mama. Men can marry as late as they please. 'Tis only Tiff who's keen to get in the parson's mousetrap.'

'You need a good woman to settle you down,' said Mrs Tandy. 'Your father says so. After all that gambling foolery and that bad set you got into, he will cut you off without a penny if you don't do as he bids.'

Ralph's usual merriment vanished, and he stared moodily into his wineglass and then tossed it off in one draught, muttering something inaudible as he reached for the decanter.

'Tiffany is worthy of a duke,' said Mrs Tandy matter-of-factly. 'There's not another girl can hold a candle to her beauty, is that no so, Mr Brown? Have you ever seen her equal?'

Henry acknowledged that she was indeed a great beauty.

'Tis only a great pity there are no eligible dukes,' Mrs Tandy sighed. 'But if I could only get her into society, I know she could catch an earl or a viscount. Even a baronet would do. We have our heart set on her being Lady Tiffany. Do you know any eligible baronets, Mr

Brown?’

‘Course he don’t,’ said Ralph. ‘He’s only just come from France, Mama.’

‘May I make a suggestion, Mrs Tandy?’ said Henry thoughtfully.

‘Please do, Mr Brown.’

‘If you would be prepared to make a few little amendments to your family, even if they offended your natural inclinations, but if you could do so for the sake of your children’s marital aspirations, you may find it easier to gain the attention you seek from society.’

‘And what amendments would they be, Mr Brown?’

‘What is the first thing members of society notice, Mrs Tandy? What is it that first announces to the world that a person is a member of the *ton*?’

Mrs Tandy glanced at her son for his opinion. ‘I go by how high their stakes are,’ said Ralph.

‘Their stakes?’ said his mother.

‘The higher they play, the richer they are,’ said Ralph with a shrug.

‘But you don’t go to gambling clubs anymore,’ said Mrs Tandy with an uncharacteristic glare. ‘Your father says so.’

Ralph said no more about gambling. ‘Next I look at their horses,’ he said. ‘And their carriage.’

‘I look at their jewels,’ said Mrs Tandy. ‘And the size of their house.’

But you are both talking only of persons with wealth,’ said Mr Brown. ‘There are people moving in the highest circles who have little money. The elusive quality of society is in lineage and manners.’

‘Beau Brummell’s tight with the Prince of Wales, and he’s got no fine lineage,’ noted Ralph. His mother nodded and said that Ralph had the right of it, for Mr Brummell was a grocer’s son.

‘But he has manners,’ said Henry. ‘And impeccable taste in clothes.’

‘He’s famous for giving set downs,’ said Ralph. ‘But Tiff calls me a clown when I say anything with spirit.’

‘Mr Brummell speaks with consideration,’ said Henry. ‘He does not *cap*. He is not a buffoon. He does not draw attention to himself through pranks.’

‘Are you calling me a buffoon?’ said Ralph, straightening up from his slouched posture.

‘You are missing my point entirely,’ said Henry. ‘I am pointing out what Mr Brummell is not, to highlight what he is. And what he is, it is within your power to replicate, if you so choose.’

‘Replicate what, exactly?’ said Mrs Tandy.

‘Manners and impeccable taste in fashion, ma’am. The first, you are more than capable of mastering by restraint, and the second, I can help you with. Let me have the direction of your family’s dress

tonight, and you will see if it makes any difference.'

Mrs Tandy looked unconvinced. Ralph yawned. Henry made a little shrug. He could do no more.

Miss Dymond returned to the table.

'And how's Tiffany?' Mrs Tandy enquired.

'Still tearful,' Miss Dymond said. 'She wishes to be alone for a half hour.'

'How did she like my idea of Vauxhall?'

'She says...' Miss Dymond hesitated, 'she does not wish to be seen in public with her family at this time.'

'Little snirp,' said Ralph with his mouth full of creamed potatoes.

Mrs Tandy looked at her son, sprawled in his chair. He saw her look and pulled a comic grin, showing his potatoes and peas. Then she looked over at Mr Brown, who was neatly cutting his beef, his posture erect, and his elbows tucked into his side. 'I think we should take Mr Brown's advice,' she decided. 'Mr Brown, will you do my family the honour of directing our dress tonight?'

'I should be delighted, ma'am.' Henry bowed his head. He glanced at the carriage clock on the marble mantelpiece. 'What time will you be leaving, ma'am?'

'Oh, 'bout nine or ten I dare say.'

'That gives me less than three hours.' Henry calculated how much he could do in that time. It would be a push, but it would be his parting gift to Mrs Tandy.

'Ain't dressing me like a mannikin,' Ralph said. 'I'm dapper-dog enough.'

'You'll do exactly what Mr Brown says, Ralph Tandy, or you'll stay home!'

Ralph raised his eyebrows at his mama's firm tone. Something in the glint of her usually genial expression must have told him from experience that she meant what she said. He shrugged. 'Fine,' he said, switching back to his boyish charm. 'Whatever mama wants, mama gets. She's Duchess Dasher in this house.'

'Then I shall begin,' said Henry, dabbing at his mouth with his napkin before rising from the table. 'Permission to assess your family's wardrobes, ma'am? Perhaps I could have the assistance of one or two maids who are handy with a needle?'

'You do whatever you please, Mr Brown. And I'll save you some pudding for when you're done. Be a shame for you to miss out on the meringue. Or perhaps you're more of a cheese man?'

But Henry had left the room. There was not a minute to spare with so much work before him.



‘WHAT IS GOING ON?’ Tiffany demanded. ‘Where are you going with my gowns?’

‘I told you,’ Laura said patiently. ‘Mr Brown is going to dress everyone tonight.’

‘I don’t want some strange man dressing me. What new nonsense of Mama’s is this? I suppose Ralph put her up to it?’

‘Mr Brown is not entirely a stranger, and Ralph had nothing to do with it. He’s as reluctant as you. It’s your mother who insists upon it.’ Laura selected the gowns according to the directions Mr Brown had given her.

‘I have the worst family in the world,’ Tiffany said, a sob catching in her throat. ‘And now I’m to be forced out to Vauxhall dressed like a...like I don’t know what.’

‘Mr Brown is an experienced designer,’ said Laura.

‘Only in some provincial corner of France,’ Tiffany pouted. ‘He was not in Paris.’

‘He is very elegant,’ argued Laura. ‘If he can turn Ralph into a smart young man like himself, it would be a wonderful improvement.’

‘I don’t think that’s possible,’ said Tiffany. ‘And I won’t submit to this nonsense. I’ve been humiliated enough this evening.’

Laura did not stay to argue further, but left with an armful of gowns. Mr Brown was in Mrs Tandy’s dressing room with his sewing case laid out. The two upper housemaids had been appointed as his assistants and were busy showing him all of Mrs Tandy’s clothes and accessories so he could make his decisions. There was a sense of sport in the air; the maids were giggly at seeing a handsome young man in madam’s dressing room, a man absorbed in examining dresses and ladies’ accessories as keenly as any miss.

When Mr Brown had made his selections, and cut and pinned, he gave orders to the maids, then moved on to Ralph’s dressing room, where loud protestations were heard from the young master of the house.

‘I have Miss Tandy’s gowns here,’ Laura said, when Mr Brown reappeared in the hall, looking weary, as though Ralph had taxed his strength.

Mr Brown took the gowns, one at a time, casting a critical eye over them and putting them back over Laura’s outstretched arm. ‘This one,’ he announced, draping Tiffany’s spangled ivory silk over his own arm. He also took a sage green high-waisted gown in fine cotton.

‘She likes the white one,’ said Laura. Tiffany was fond of the large spangles. ‘But not the green. She thinks it muddies her eyes.’ She looked up to find Mr Brown studying her closely, assessing her inch by inch from the top of her head to her heels. She flushed a little at such scrutiny, but it was not a rapacious look, more like that of a doctor examining a patient. Still, it was very unsettling. He turned away when he had finished whatever assessment he had been making, murmuring something about baubles and inches, and returned to the portion of Mrs Tandy’s suite that he had adopted as a workshop for the evening.

A while later, Laura tapped lightly at Tiffany’s door. Mr Brown was behind her, holding the ivory gown. ‘Tiffany, are you ready for Mr Brown to come in?’

‘I’m not going!’ was the decided answer from the other side of the door.

‘But your mama particularly desires you to go as a family tonight.’

‘I won’t go into public with that coxcomb of a brother of mine. I *won’t*.’

Laura looked helplessly over her shoulder at Mr Brown. ‘I really don’t think she will be persuaded.’

‘Send for Master Tandy,’ Mr Brown ordered.

‘For Ralph?’

He gave a brisk nod.

Laura hesitated, wondering what good it would do for Ralph to vex his sister when she was already in a pet. But Mr Brown was waiting, so she walked quickly down the hall to Ralph’s rooms in the other wing and tapped on the door, calling out, ‘Mr Brown would like to see you, Master Tandy.’

The door was yanked open and Ralph stood there. ‘What’s he want?’ he barked.

Laura gave a little gasp.

‘What?’ demanded Ralph, glaring at her. ‘Look like a numskull, don’t I? I feel half-feathered.’ He put a hand to his bare waistcoat where his fobs and seals usually hung and mournfully eyed his modest buttons of polished steel, which had replaced the enormous set his coats typically bore.

‘No, no,’ stammered Laura. ‘Oh, Master Tandy, you look...’ she rummaged for a phrase he would appreciate, ‘why, you look quite of the first stare!’

‘Do I?’ Ralph’s frown lightened.

‘Top of the trees,’ she added. ‘Precise to a pin.’

His chest visibly swelled. ‘I do?’

She nodded eagerly. He looked modest and elegant. His cravat was plain white and beautifully tied. His waistcoat was of a sober light

blue, his swallowtail coat of buff superfine. His boots gleamed like mirrors. There were no trinkets, no showy jewellery, but only one modest diamond pin in his cravat. His hair was shorter, brushed to a golden sheen, and neatly arranged in the Windswept, but now it was a gentle wind, not a hurricane of blowsy forelocks. He did not look at all like Ralph Tandy. 'Come to Miss Tiffany's rooms, if you please. Mr Brown is asking for you.'

Laura realised the wisdom of Mr Brown when Tiffany first set eyes on her brother. She blinked in surprise. Then stared. 'Ralph?' she said. 'Is that you?'

He grinned and made an exaggerated bow.

'Well!' Tiffany could say no more than that for the moment. 'Well!'

'Like it?' Ralph asked. 'I think I look a bore, but Brown says it's all bang up to the echo, so to speak.'

'Why, you look...*elegant*,' marvelled Tiffany.

'Shall you get dressed now, dear?' Laura said encouragingly, holding out the ivory silk.

'That's not my gown?' Tiffany said, eyeing it suspiciously. 'Mine has spangles on it. Big ones. Where are my spangles?'

Mr Brown had now gained entrance and was directing Laura and the maids, and calling for shawls and shoes. 'The white kid,' he said, pointing out the shoes in question.

'You cannot come in here and go through my wardrobe!' Tiffany exclaimed. Mr Brown ignored her.

'Mrs Tandy said he might,' Laura assured her. 'Mr Brown knows what he is doing, only look what he has accomplished with your brother.'

'Well, yes, I see that, but I don't care for that shawl,' Tiffany said, as Mr Brown took up a mossy green shawl with gold fringing. 'Mr Brown ignored her, draping the shawl over his arm and pointing out an ivory Kashmir, saying to the maid, 'That one for Miss Tandy. Warm underclothes,' he also said to the maid, who gaped back at him, amazed that a gentleman would even mention such a word. 'They must be white, but they must be warm for an outdoor venue. Shivering is not elegant.'

'How dare you!' sputtered Tiffany. 'Don't you dare show him my... my underthings.'

'I do not need to see them,' said Mr Brown briskly. 'I want to see your jewels, however. Miss Dymond, would you oblige?'

Miss Dymond threw Tiffany a half apologetic look, but hurried to obey Mr Brown.

'If I must wear that tedious white thing,' pouted Tiffany, 'I had better wear something bright to give me *some* colour. I want the rubies.'

‘Pearls,’ said Mr Brown, taking out a case holding a slender string of pearls with a matching pair of small, single pearl earrings.’

‘I never wear pearls,’ said Tiffany.

‘Only pearls,’ Mr Brown said to the maid he was handing the jewels to. ‘The smaller circlet for the neck, the longer one for the hair. No feathers, no other jewels.’ His eye fell on Tiffany’s dressing table with its collection of scent bottles. He examined them, unstopping some of them to sniff their contents, pulling a face at some of the scents. ‘This one,’ he said, giving it to the other maid. ‘A modest amount.’

‘I don’t care for *Eau de Rose*,’ complained Tiffany. ‘One can barely smell it.’

‘I think my work is done,’ said Mr Brown, casting a last look over his choices. ‘A simple knot on the head,’ he said to the maid with the jewels. ‘A few ringlets down over one shoulder. Don’t curl too tightly.’

‘Laura always does my hair,’ Tiffany said.

‘I will do it just as you say,’ Laura assured Mr Brown.

‘Miss Dymond must get dressed herself,’ Mr Brown said. Laura stared at him. He held out the mossy green shawl. ‘I shall fetch your gown. Have you evening shoes?’

‘I...I have a pair of flats,’ stammered Laura. She looked at Tiffany’s green shawl, reluctant to take it.

‘I shall fetch your gown. I lengthened the hem and put a few tucks in,’ Mr Brown said, moving to the door and waiting there for her to follow.

Laura looked at Tiffany. ‘Oh, but I cannot wear Miss Tandy’s shawl.’

‘Mrs Tandy included you as one of the party, did she not?’ said Mr Brown. ‘My instructions are to dress everyone.’

Laura still looked between him and Tiffany, clearly torn.

‘Oh, take the shawl,’ said Tiffany, waving her off. ‘I never wear that one. Green muddies my eyes.’

‘Which gown did you adjust?’ Laura asked as she walked to her own little room adjacent to Tiffany’s suite. She only owned three good gowns: the everyday one she wore at that moment; a navy crape she kept for daywear when accompanying Tiffany on calls and trips out, and a simple lilac gown for evening wear. All her gowns had been turned and mended, some inexpensive brooch or new fichu added at periodic times to freshen her appearance.

Mr Brown did not reply, he only bid her wait a moment while he fetched it. He soon returned with Tiffany’s pale sage green cotton. ‘You have adjusted Tiffany’s gown?’ Laura was dismayed.

‘Go and dress,’ Mr Brown said. ‘Shall I send one of the maids to assist you?’

‘No, no. I am well able to dress myself.’

‘And your hair, Miss Dymond—’

‘I can do my own hair,’ she assured him. ‘I always do.’

‘But you must do it a little differently tonight.’

‘Must I?’ She would have put a hand self-consciously to her hair, which was in its usual tight knot at the nape of her neck, but her hands were occupied with holding the gown and shawl.

‘You must brush it out until it gleams, Miss Dymond, and then you must twist it up just so.’ He proceeded to demonstrate the shape she was to make, and she stifled a laugh at the contrast between his earnest expression and the comedy of a young man pretending to arrange his hair. He saw the suppressed laughter on her face and smiled down at her in reply. All laughter fled as her breath caught in her chest at the sweetness of that smile. Oh dear, she thought. I am having my head turned. This will never do. She ducked her face away and said, ‘Very good, sir,’ and made a swift departure into her bedroom, leaning against the door to close it behind her. What an unusual evening this was turning out to be.

THE FAMILY GATHERED in the drawing room, the servants peeking in at them, the maids making little *oohs* and *ahhs*.

Mrs Tandy was resplendent in demure midnight blue silk with a short train and a mink tippet. ‘Sobriety and luxury,’ Mr Brown declared. ‘A disarming combination.’

Mrs Tandy’s sapphires were not enormous jewels, such as those Tiffany had worn to the opera the night before. They were simple tear-shaped drops nestling just above the high neckline of her gown. On her head she wore a Mameluke turban of matching midnight blue, with a single white ostrich feather.

‘You look splendid, Mama,’ marvelled Tiffany, who had cheered up enormously now that she had seen the full effects of Mr Brown’s work. ‘I don’t think I’ve ever seen you in that shade of blue before. It quite becomes you. You look positively regal.’

‘A regular duchess,’ agreed Ralph. ‘Regular empress, even.’

‘What would Mr Tandy say if he could see me?’ Mrs Tandy wondered. She did not give her usual peal of laughter, nor did she bat Ralph on the arm or rumple his hair in return for his compliment. She had caught the eye of Mr Brown and shared a little knowing look with him. She bestowed a gracious smile on her children and told them calmly and sincerely that they looked very fine. A little plain, to be sure, but Mr Brown had assured her that they were just as they ought to be.

Laura had seen the look pass between Mrs Tandy and Mr Brown, and ascertained that he had given Mrs Tandy a little talk on etiquette. She guessed this because he had given one to her. He had been

waiting when she emerged from her bedroom, her hair arranged and the gown and shawl lying in unfamiliar soft, sumptuous folds about her. He had given her that close, appraising look that was more doctor-like than lover-like before nodding in satisfaction.

‘Very good,’ he had said, and then his assessing eyes had rested on her own, and she had looked away to avoid another of those embarrassing blushes. ‘I knew that colour would suit. It brings out the hazel light in your eyes, Miss Dymond.’

‘Thank you,’ she had managed to say, feeling proud of herself for being able to speak two words without a tremor in her voice.

‘But one last thing is needed,’ he had said, blocking her way as she moved to the stairs. ‘Wait there.’ And he darted away to Tiffany’s rooms, knocked on the door and spoke to the maid who opened it. The maid returned, putting something in his hand with a little bob of a curtsy.

‘Allow me,’ said Mr Brown, holding up a delicate necklace of coral beads.

‘Oh, I don’t think I should wear Miss Tiffany’s necklace without her say so.’

‘I have *carte blanche* tonight,’ he assured her, and then he moved close behind her and affixed the necklace, his fingers brushing against the skin of her neck and making it tingle. He gave her the little etiquette talk as he fastened the clasp.

‘Tonight, Miss Dymond, you are a representative of the most elegant family in London. Never let anyone make you feel otherwise. Hold your head high. Know who you are. There is no duke nor duchess, no prince nor society leader who has the right to make you feel inferior in any way. The true sign of greatness is not title nor wealth; it is in *grace*. Be gracious to all, whether they deserve it or not. That will set you apart from ninety in a hundred, even in the highest echelons of society.’

She nodded to affirm that she understood him, but the nearness of him caused that wretched blush she had feared to come upon her, and so she mumbled her thanks and murmured she must not keep the family waiting, and hurried downstairs, telling herself that it was a good thing this unusual, handsome man was leaving tomorrow, though it gave her a pang to recall it.

Now Laura looked about at the smiling family group. Tiffany and Ralph were in harmony again, looking breathtakingly handsome with their golden hair, their bright blue eyes, and their modish, dignified appearance. Tiffany had been an extraordinarily pretty girl before, bedecked in her ribbons and trinkets and jewels. But now she was a beautiful young woman.

Mrs Tandy beamed on her children and had a compliment to spare

for Laura. 'Who is this new Laura?' she had cried upon seeing her. 'La! You look very fine, does she not, Ralph?'

'Regular dasher,' was Ralph's generous compliment.

'You look very pretty,' agreed Tiffany. 'How well that colour suits you. And your hair is very nicely arranged. You ought always to wear it like that.'

'I hope you don't mind me borrowing this?' Laura said, putting a hand to the coral necklace.

'Pooh,' said Tiffany dismissively. 'I never wear it. You may keep it. Is the carriage ready, Mama? Shall we go?'

'Thank you, Mr Brown,' Laura said as they began a stately procession out of the room.

'Your servant,' said Mr Brown, bowing at the waist. He looked dreadfully tired, she thought.

'Are you sure you won't come?' Mrs Tandy said in parting. 'Twill be a famous night, I'm sure of it. Come and keep us in good order, Mr Brown.'

Mr Brown bowed again and said that he was ready to retire for the night. 'I thank you once again for your hospitality, ma'am, for I may be gone before you rise tomorrow. I shall make an early start.'

Laura felt a lurch in her stomach at the thought that he might be gone when she awoke. She wanted to tell him not to go without saying goodbye, or to beg Mrs Tandy to press him to remain longer, for surely two days was too short a time for him to be fully recovered from his injuries. But it was not her place to say such things, and it would not be seemly to show strong feeling, so she only gave him a mute look of sorrow which he did not see, for he was looking at Tiffany at that moment. Tiffany was dimpling up at him and he was smiling back with that dazzling, charming smile he always gave her.

'I will not forget my little lesson,' Tiffany said, smilingly. 'I shall remember what you said about being both exclusive but not proud. Did you give Ralph a lesson?'

'Gave me a prime rattle,' said Ralph. 'Got to watch my tongue. No going on the mop, and no capers. Least not when I'm squiring you and Ma.'

'And no slang,' added Tiffany, taking his arm. 'Thank you, Mr Brown, for your work this evening. I confess I still have doubts of it being as effective as you claim, but I am grateful for your attentions to us. There, was that graciously put?'

'Most gracious, Miss Tandy.' Mr Brown bowed again.

'I dare say I won't see you if you are leaving early,' Tiffany said. 'For I never rise before noon when we go out late. I wish you all the best.'

'Come back and see us,' added Mrs Tandy, gathering up her tippet,

for the footman had delivered the message that the carriage was ready.

‘See you anon, old fellow,’ bellowed Ralph as he escorted his mother and sister out. ‘I shan’t say another bad word about Frenchies again. I’ll say I’ve met a capital Frenchie, good enough to pass for an English gent!’

‘Oh, Ralph,’ scolded Tiffany.

Laura was the last to leave. She cast a last look back at Mr Brown, wanting to say something. His posture had slumped a little as the family left the room, as though he were quite spent and ready to sink down in a chair. ‘Shall you be well, Mr Brown?’ she said tentatively. ‘That is, do you have somewhere to go tomorrow?’

He gave her a tired, wry smile. ‘I shall be fine, Miss Dymond. But... thank you. It has been a pleasure. Thank you for rescuing me with your trusty umbrella.’

‘We both know that it was you who rescued me.’

‘We rescued each other, Miss Dymond. I will never forget your kindness in bringing me here.’ His voice grew a little husky. ‘Heaven only knows what would have become of me had I not found a place of rest that night.’

Laura felt a rush of pity at the note of sadness in his voice. She wanted to say more, but Tiffany’s voice floated down the hallway, calling for her to hurry up. ‘Goodbye,’ she whispered, and hurried away.



IT CAME as a surprise to Henry to hear English spoken when he awoke. It reminded him that he was far from home. And then he recalled that he no longer had anywhere to call home in France, any more than he did in this country where the citizens were fond of their king and queen, even if their king was said to be prone to bouts of madness. They protested to disdain their *dauphin*, their Prince of Wales, calling him dissolute and a winebibber, and yet they got so very excited at getting even a glimpse of him in the park, or at the opera. To be present at one of the exclusive social events where this prince showed up to shake a finger with his future subjects seemed to be the peak of languid ecstasy among the *ton*, if the society columns were to be believed.

They were strange people the English, thought Henry, as he lay in his comfortable guest bed listening to the voices in the streets below. He heard the early morning delivery men shouting greetings to one another and exchanging flirtations with the scullery maids busy on the front steps, scrubbing them on hands and knees. But he liked this family of lively, bourgeoisie monarchists. He was not offended by their gaucherie; he found it refreshing. He liked the warmth between them. He liked that they were a *family*. The Bruneaus had been good to take him into their home; they had saved his life, but there had been no warmth, only a hard-earned respect as he repaid them many times over by improving their fortunes, bringing a measure of fame to them by his own designs and labour. It had felt more like an amicable business arrangement than a family.

He sighed impatiently at himself, mentally shaking off all these thoughts. He had no time for them. He had to find work and shelter and quickly. He rose and washed from the fresh water in the ewer on the washstand. He drew back the curtains that he might have the maximum light for his barbering and dressing. It was another drizzly grey day. Did the sun never shine in England?

He packed his trunk, folding every article of clothing with care and precision. When he had done, and the straps on his portmanteau were secured, he took one last look about the room. It would likely be the last pleasant surroundings he would enjoy for some time. He left the room quietly, aware that the family would be sound asleep at such an hour. He walked down the carpeted hallway, past young Master Tandy's rooms. At the other end of the hall was Miss Dymond's little room. He had caught a glimpse of its interior last night when she went

to dress: everything neat and plain, without fuss or adornment, just as her own appearance was. But how delightful she had looked on her way out to the famed Vauxhall Gardens. She could have been a *débutante* herself rather than a paid companion. He recalled the mournful look she had given him in parting last night. There had been a fellow feeling between them, he thought.

Should he tap on her door and bid her farewell? He hesitated at the top of the stairs, considering this. It was not the seemly thing to do, but it would be the last time he ever saw her. He would like to shake her hand in parting and take one last look into those brown eyes that made him think of the lustrous sheen of a swathe of changeable *moiré*. In his mind's eye he dressed her in such a fabric; the silk taffeta would be in a shade of *café crème*, flashing warm gold as the gown moved and caught the light.

A noise from the hall below distracted him from his thoughts, and he shrugged them off. It would only embarrass Miss Dymond were he to go to her door. She would be in her night rail and would not be pleased to be seen in her undress, nor to be woken after only a few hours of sleep. He hauled up his portmanteau and descended, wondering if the staff would rebuff a request for a bread roll or two as a portable breakfast, for he had no money, and could not know when he would eat again, if at all that day.

Symes, the first footman, was at the foot of the stairs when he reached the ground floor.

'Cain't go,' Symes said, drawing out his vowels, which made him sound peculiar to Henry's ears.

'Beg pardon?' Henry said, standing on the last step, unable to descend any farther, because Symes was blocking his way.

'Cain't go,' repeated Symes. 'Mr Forster!' he called, pronouncing the butler's name as *Foor-stur*. 'Ee's tryin' to leave!'

Henry was too surprised to do anything but remain on the step, hearing the heavy tread of the butler hurrying down the hall.

'Ah, Mr Brown,' said the butler, panting a little. He was a large man whose chin and neck seemed all of one piece as they disappeared into the well-starched points of his collar. Henry thought the family livery was too showy with its gold, military-style frogging and glass wigs, but the butler was easier on the eye in his neat black coat and his spotless shirt and stockings. 'Mr Brown, you cannot leave.'

'Cannot leave?' Was he being accused of something? Were they going to search his case for stolen goods? Or perhaps something unforeseen and unpleasant had occurred last night, and he was to be held accountable for it.

'Orders of the mistress,' panted Mr Forster.

'For what reason?'

Mr Forster gave no reply, but ordered Symes to send Bessie, one of the maids, up to madam's room immediately to wake her.

'Mr Forster,' Henry tried again, speaking pleasantly, as he always did. 'What is the meaning of this? Am I accused of anything that I should be detained in this way? Pray, let me pass. Don't force me to make a dash for it.' He smiled to show that he was being perfectly reasonable, but the butler was immovable. His impressive bulk would not be easy to *dash* past. He would have to charge the fellow like a bull to move him out of the way.

There was a scuffling noise from overhead, and an interchange of feminine voices floated down the stairwell. Henry craned his neck to look up to see Mrs Tandy leaning over the bannister of the third floor.

'Mr Brown!' she called down. 'Wait!' And she made a clattering and graceless descent, her scarlet Chinese print dressing gown billowing out, her heeled house slippers clacking on the polished oak of the stairs as she made haste to reach him.

'Madame!' exclaimed Henry, as she rounded the bend of the stairwell and came into full view, 'what is wrong?'

'Wrong?' she cried, putting out both hands towards him, her eyes bright. 'Wrong? La! You foolish boy, you genius, you marvel, you! Nothing is wrong, everything has come right!'

'My dear madame, what has happened?'

'Put that case down this instant,' Mrs Tandy said. 'Forster, have Mr Brown's case taken back to his room.'

'Mrs Tandy, you must explain.'

'You cannot leave us now, Mr Brown. You must stay. Name your wage. Name it, and it shall be doubled, but you cannot leave us before the season is over. You must keep us in fashion, Mr Brown.'

Mrs Tandy clutched his arm with both hands, as though terrified he would escape. He waited patiently for an explanation.

'Oh, Mr Brown, if only you could have seen it!' Her hands tightened, and her eyes shone. 'There we were, sitting at our table – we were very lucky to get a table – it was mortal busy for it was rumoured the Prince of Wales was coming to watch the new rope walking act. La! – it was a sight, I assure you! How she did not fall! And how short her skirt!'

'You were sitting at your table,' Henry prompted, keen to hear the real heart of the story.

'And we were behaving so quietly, just as you bid us, Mr Brown. No laughing, no loud talking, no jesting and joking, and dear Ralph was as prim as a parson – I could not have believed my boy could be so quiet—'

'And while you were at your table—?' Henry said gently.

'La! It was the queerest thing, Mr Brown, for the quieter we sat, the

more attention we got. Everyone promenading by was lifting up their quizzing glasses, staring at us and talking about us, and I was sure they were saying what a mousey, plain little family we were, and it almost put me off my ham.' She paused to draw breath.

'And then, Mrs Tandy?'

'And then, Mr Brown – *la!* – then *he* comes. The Prince of Wales himself, with all his friends about him, and what a sight, Mr Brown, and there was nothing mousey and plain and quiet about the prince nor his friends!'

'And that was the remarkable event?'

'Why no! That was not it at all. What happened next was that Mr Brummell, one of the prince's party, was walking right alongside His Highness, as though they were the best of friends. The prince looked over at our booth, and he saw our Tiffany, who was sitting pretty as a picture, even if she had nothing but a few pearls on, and he said something to Mr Brummell.'

'And what did he say?'

'To be sure, how can I know? We were as far from them as that urn is from us.' She gestured at the enormous oriental urn in the hallway. 'But say something His Highness did, and Mr Brummell, he really is a plain looking fellow in my opinion, I cannot see why he is so famed just because he polishes his boots with champagne—'

'And what did Mr Brummell do?'

'Why, he didn't do anything other than look us all up and down and say something to the prince.'

Henry felt it was too early in the morning for this convoluted conversation. 'Mrs Tandy, what event occurred last night to make you ask me to remain?'

'Why, Mr Brummell told the prince that we were, and I repeat his exact words, Mr Brown, he told him that we were *a fine-looking family*.'

'I see. Yet he was too far away for you to hear him.'

'But everyone around him heard him! And they repeated it, and it went off like a bout of fireworks! And that's not all, Mr Brown.' Mrs Tandy had tears of joy in her eyes at this point in her narrative. She was squeezing Henry's arm so tightly that her nails were digging into him. 'That's not all. Wait till you hear what the Prince of Wales said next.'

Henry waited, nodding encouragingly.

'He said to Mr Brummell, and these are his exact words, he said *find out if the fair miss will be at the Petty-Blount ball. I should like a dance with her*. Oh, Mr Brown, to think of our Tiffany dancing with the *Prince of Wales*.'

'So, you are to go to this ball?'

‘If we get invites sent,’ said Mrs Tandy. ‘I’ve never met Lady Petty-Blount.’ This seemed something of an anti-climax to the story, but Mrs Tandy was not to be downcast for more than a moment. ‘All night folks were bowing and nodding at us, sending their compliments and asking to be introduced and we were quite the new fashion. La! Mr Brown, we *are* the new fashion. Wait till I tell Mr Tandy when he comes tonight!’

‘And you wish me to stay on a little longer as the family dresser?’

‘Yes! You cannot leave us now! So many of the ladies hinted they would send us invitations to their balls and musicales and routs, and you must dress us, Mr Brown, we cannot go on without you. You will stay, won’t you? At least till the end of the season.’

Henry looked down into those light blue eyes and wondered how this would all end for the Tandys. But a great burden of care fell from him at the thought that he would not be cast out into the unknown just yet.

‘Mrs Tandy, it would be my honour to serve your family for the season.’

‘Oh, Mr Brown, I could kiss you. I *will* kiss you!’

‘But there is much work to be done, Mrs Tandy,’ Henry said in a business-like tone, when he had been soundly kissed on both cheeks. ‘A whole new wardrobe, ma’am. We must find the best tailor and dressmaker in town and I must draw up designs.’

‘Oh yes, Mr Brown! We will do everything you tell us to do! But for now, my dear, I must return to bed, for we did not get home till four.’ She yawned to prove this point. ‘We shall meet at noon and begin our plans.’

‘In the meantime, ma’am, may I have use of the library table with paper and ink to begin drawing designs?’

‘You shall have whatever you desire, Mr Brown, and I shall tell the servants so. Mr Tandy’s book room has plenty of everything. Ring for Forster if you want anything else. Good night, Mr Brown, and thank you!’

‘Your servant,’ said Henry with a bow, feeling as satisfied with this new turn of events as Mrs Tandy did.

ALL THAT MORNING cards and invitations arrived in a steady stream. Henry, who was absorbed in drawing ideas for ballgowns and carriage dresses for Miss Tandy, wondered at the frequency of the sonorous doorbell chime. He heard Symes complaining that as soon as he got to one end of the house, the bell was going off again and he had to rush back again.

Miss Dymond was the first of the household to find Henry. She burst in at the library door. ‘I’m so glad to see you still here,’ she

cried, and then flushed, as though embarrassed over her enthusiasm.

'I am glad to be here,' Henry said, looking up from his drawing. 'Did you enjoy your evening as much as Mrs Tandy?'

'I doubt anyone could enjoy it as much as Mrs Tandy.' She laughed, and he realised it was the first time he had seen her laugh. That hint of sadness she usually bore about her was momentarily gone, and the effect was enchanting. He must draw some designs for her also. Autumnal colours would suit her colouring best. Scarlet and gold might be too bold, as he knew her position required her to be modest in presentation, but he was sure he could get away with soft russet, and a discreet pale gold as a signature colour for trimming.

'Oh, you are drawing designs for gowns,' she said, seeing the papers littered over the enormous desk. 'May I look?'

'By all means.'

'They are beautiful. So elegant. Tiffany will be the best dressed lady of the season, to be sure.'

'She is a veritable muse to design for,' Henry said. 'Such perfect proportions of form to carry the newest fashions. She will look as a miniature Roman goddess when I have dressed her, what do you think? A Flora, perhaps?'

'Yes,' agreed Miss Dymond quietly. 'Indeed she will.'

The doorbell sounded again. 'Goodness,' said Miss Dymond. 'That bell has been going all morning, it even seeped into my dreams. There are no less than twelve cards on the hall console already, and some of them have very grand seals.'

There was a man's voice in the hallway, and Miss Dymond looked at Mr Brown, and said in a low voice, 'Oh no. That sounds like—'

She was interrupted by the library door being flung wide, and a small man in a black cloth coat and breeches stared at Henry through a pair of round glasses and bellowed, 'Who the deuce are you?'

Miss Dymond curtsied to the arrival, but he took no notice of her.

Henry stood up from the desk and made a polite bow. 'Mr Brown, at your service, sir,' he said in his clear, affable voice.

'Foreign!' exclaimed the man, taking a step nearer to see what was scattered over the desk. 'What the deuce is a foreigner doing in my library? What's all this?' He gestured at the drawings.

Henry opened his mouth to introduce himself more fully but was now interrupted by the voice of Mrs Tandy coming down the hall, calling out, 'Theo! You're early, my love!' And Henry watched in amusement as tall, broad Mrs Tandy gathered the brusque little man to her bosom. 'Oh, my dear, what news! Ah, but I see you have met our Mr Brown already. My dear, the man is a *miracle* worker. Thanks to him we have *arrived*, just look!' She released him and waved a sheaf of envelopes taken up from the silver salver in the hall.

‘Who the deuce is Mr Brown?’ demanded the man, whom Henry ascertained was Mr Tandy, judging by so tactile a greeting from Mrs Tandy. His unfashionable eyeglasses had been skewed from the pressure of his wife’s chest, and he readjusted them on his nose.

‘He is our dresser,’ said Mrs Tandy mildly, ‘and it is all thanks to him that we are a *success*. Look at all these invitations!’ She waved them again.

‘What’s a foreign *dresser* when he’s at home? And why is he in *my* home, nay in *my* library?’

‘Mr Tandy is fond of his book room,’ Mrs Tandy explained good-humouredly to Henry. ‘But, my heart, I did not think you would be here so early. You said you would come for dinner, so I ordered your favourite. Cook shall make the gammon just the way you like it with leek pudding. Have you breakfasted? I’ll call for coffee and tell you all about it. Laura, Mr Brown, come for breakfast!’

Mr Tandy allowed himself to be hustled from the room. ‘Well,’ said Henry. ‘So that is Mr Tandy. Is he always so gruff?’ Mr Tandy, in his black stuff coat and his black waistcoat, and only his silver fob watch alleviating his sober attire, was a contrast to his vibrantly attired wife and his handsome children, though he could see where Tiffany had inherited her diminutive figure.

‘He is very stern,’ admitted Miss Dymond, ‘but there is no malice in him, and he is quite a different person with his children. At least, he is with Tiffany.’

‘But not with Master Ralph?’

‘They have had some fallings out this past year. Ralph got in with some bad people, and Mr Tandy had to pay off a deal of gambling debt.’

‘I see. Shall we join them for breakfast?’

‘I think we must,’ said Miss Dymond, with a hint of anxiety. ‘It was practically an order.’

Henry turned to a bevelled mirror on the wall to ensure his hair was neat and his cravat was crisp and his coat smooth and without wrinkle. He happened to catch Miss Dymond watching him in the mirror, and she flushed as he caught her eye, turning her head away.

‘Will I do, Miss Dymond?’ he could not resist saying.

She blushed more deeply.

‘Forgive me if I seem to be preening, but my attire and personal presentation has long been my calling card, so to speak, and now I find myself in a position where such things matter greatly. Mr Tandy will not agree to a scarecrow being taken on as dresser to his family, I dare say.’

‘No one could accuse you of being a scarecrow, Mr Brown,’ Miss Dymond sallied bravely, matching his friendly manner, though she

still blushed.

He put out his arm as though he were taking a lady in to dinner. 'Shall we face the paternal gruffness together? We are allies now, Miss Dymond.'

'Are we?' She took his arm to make their way up to the breakfast room on the first floor.

'We are. I foresee a challenging assignment ahead in these remaining weeks of the season. To match the Tandy siblings with suitable marriage partners is not going to be easy. They will be charting a path through unfriendly waters at the best of times. We must steer them as best we can.'

'We? I'm sure I have no influence in the matter. You are the genius who won them a word of praise from the fastidious Mr Brummell.'

'Oh, but you played your part admirably, Miss Dymond. Do not underestimate yourself. You brought a calm dignity to their party. You are a good, ladylike influence on Miss Tandy. You must accept some credit.'

'Nonsense,' said Miss Dymond with a little laugh. But he had succeeded in driving away her awkward embarrassment, and as they climbed the stairs together, she looked up at him and smiled, her eyes glowing with warmth. They were almost at the top of the stairs to the first floor. Someone was coming down from the second floor.

'Is that you, Laura?' called the sweet voice of Miss Tiffany. 'You were not there to help me dress.'

'Forgive me,' called back Miss Dymond. 'I thought you would sleep awhile. I went in search of Mr Brown to thank him for his good work last night.'

'Did Mama catch him in time?' cried Tiffany, lightly running down the remaining stairs to meet them at the landing.

'Good morning, Miss Tandy,' Henry said, bowing his head to her. 'Mrs Tandy did indeed *catch me*, and here I am.'

'Oh, that is famous!' said Tiffany, clapping her hands with pleasure. She eyed them both with a curious expression, as though assessing them together; Miss Dymond still had a lingering glow on her face.

'Your father has come,' Miss Dymond said. 'Did you know?'

'Papa is here? Then I must tell him all about last night. Where is he?'

'In the breakfast parlour.'

Tiffany went ahead, reaching the room first. 'Papa!' she cried, rushing at the seat at the head of the table and kissing the cheek of her father.

'Let me look at you!' hollered Mr Tandy. 'Have you broken all their hearts yet?'

‘Hardly, Papa,’ said Tiffany, sitting next to her father and shaking out her napkin. ‘We have been invited absolutely nowhere, but all that has changed now Mr Brown has come.’

Mr Tandy eyed Henry like a hawk eyeing a mouse as Henry took his seat at the table. Miss Dymond sat opposite him, beside Tiffany.

‘Has the Petty-Blount invitation come yet, Mama?’ Tiffany asked, eagerly eyeing the pile of invitations at her mother’s elbow.

‘Not yet, my lamb, but it shall surely come.’

‘Have you told Papa what Beau Brummell said, and what the Prince of Wales said? The *prince*, Papa, only think of it!’

‘Don’t hold that spendthrift scattergood in high opinion,’ said her father, stirring his coffee. ‘Even if he is a Whig. Who’s this Petty-Blount when they’re at home, and where’s that scapegrace son of yours, Mrs Tandy? Has he no manners? Can’t get to the table when his father calls?’

‘My love, we did not know you would be here for breakfast, and we did not get home till past three o’clock, and Ralph later still, for he stayed behind with some friends he met with. Very pleasant friends,’ she added, seeing the look on her husband’s face. ‘School fellows of his. None of those rakish types.’

Mr Tandy made a little growl.

The remainder of the meal was taken up with a detailed recounting of the evening at Vauxhall Gardens and who had been rumoured to say what, and who had bowed to them or asked to be introduced to them, and how it was all mysteriously connected to Mr Brown’s genius for plain dressing.

A bleary-eyed Ralph made his appearance just as the meal was closing. ‘Father!’ said Ralph, spying his father with a little visible jolt of surprise. His usual jollity was muted this morning, either by his lack of sleep, or by his discomfiture at his father’s presence. ‘I did not know you had come, sir.’ He bowed stiffly.

‘That much is clear,’ said Mr Tandy. ‘Or you would not slink in so late when your mother is ready to have the table cleared. I did not bring my son up to be inconsiderate and lazy.’

‘My dear heart,’ pleaded Mrs Tandy, putting a plump hand on her husband’s. ‘Ralph was a credit to us last night, such a gentleman. La! you would have been proud as you could be of him.’

Mr Tandy made another growl, and Ralph took the farthest seat from his father’s, and moodily reached for the dish of buttered eggs.

‘Mr Brown,’ said Mr Tandy, casting down his napkin as though he were throwing down a gauntlet. ‘I don’t know about all this fashion and society nonsense. I’m a business man, worked my way from the mill floor to be owner of many mills. I believe in progress, advancement, and I want my daughter to marry upwards, and if she’s

got to have all this fashion and flummery nonsense to do it, then so be it. And I want my *son*,' the word was said with a hint of ire, 'to be a man fit to inherit my hard work and *not gamble it away*.' These last words were directed at Ralph with enough ferocity to make everyone at the table flinch uneasily. 'So if you're to be directing my family in the ways of fashion and society and whatever it is Mrs Tandy claims you can do, then I shall trust to Mrs Tandy's judgement.'

Mrs Tandy reached to pat her husband's hand fondly again, but it was clenched so tightly that she only waved her fingers over it.

'But there's one condition of your employ, Mr Brown, and if you can't satisfy me on it, then all the silks and satins and top boots from here to Leeds and back again won't be of no use.'

'What condition is that, Mr Tandy?' Mrs Tandy said, a little alarmed.

'Keep Ralph out of gambling hells and keep fortune hunters away from my little Tiffany. I won't have my money going to card sharps or nest featherers.'

Henry thought this rather an unfair charge, but he must tread carefully, for he needed this position badly. 'With the greatest respect, sir,' he said evenly, 'my own youth prohibits me from being in the place of a guardian to Master and Miss Tandy. But if you will charge your son to heed my directions, then I most certainly will advise him from unsure paths. As to Miss Tandy, with the assistance of Miss Dymond and Mrs Tandy, I shall endeavour to be very observant of any suitor who vies for her hand.'

Mr Tandy eyed him like a hawk again. Mrs Tandy and Tiffany seemed to be holding their breath as they waited for Mr Tandy's final pronouncement on the matter. Ralph brooded over his toast.

'Can Mr Brown stay?' Mrs Tandy said, breaking the silence at last when she could wait no longer. 'Do say he can, my love.'

'Please do, Papa,' added Tiffany sweetly.

'I want a word with Mr Brown,' said Mr Tandy. 'In private.'

The ladies shared a glance and rose as one from the table to leave the room.

'I haven't finished my eggs,' said Ralph, looking like a sulky schoolboy, but his mother and sister cast him warning looks.

Mrs Tandy stood sentry at the door to see Laura and her children pass by, then she stepped out, pulling the door behind her, but not closing it completely. She put a finger to her lips to hush them and leaned in to listen at the opening.

'Door!' bellowed Mr Tandy. Mrs Tandy pulled it shut. Ralph muttered that he was going to Fox's to get a proper breakfast and disappeared. The ladies hovered in the morning room opposite, keen to hear the outcome of the interview. They heard Mr Brown's

pleasant, mild voice raised in pitch slightly at one point, as though he were surprised, but it levelled out again soon enough. It was a short interview, and the door soon opened again. Mrs Tandy hurried out. 'Well?' she queried, as Mr Brown appeared.

Laura thought his look was a little rueful, as though he had heard something he was not pleased with, but he bowed and said, 'Mr Tandy is happy for me to remain in your employ, ma'am.'

'I knew he would!' cried Mrs Tandy. Tiffany clapped her hands. When Tiffany and Mrs Tandy returned to the breakfast room, Laura said quietly to him, 'Are you glad, Mr Brown?'

'Of course. Delighted.'

'Only...you looked as though something troubled you when you came out.'

'Am I that transparent?' He turned his attention to her, as though to read her as well as she had read him. She lowered her eyes, feeling as though she had been caught spying on him.

'I beg your pardon,' she murmured. 'It must have been my fancy.' She hurried away, deciding to go upstairs and snatch a half hour to write a letter to Frederick while Tiffany was engaged with her father. She felt sure that Mr Brown's eyes were upon her as she crossed the hall and up the stairs, but she dared not look back to see; it was certainly another fanciful idea, and it would not do. It would not do at all. She must keep her mind firmly fixed on Frederick.



HENRY WATCHED Miss Dymond hurry away with that little flush in her cheeks she so often had. He thought her blushes were very becoming. There was something so artless and kindly about her, that he had almost told her what Mr Tandy had charged him with, but he had assured Mr Tandy of his discretion, and felt he ought to keep silent on the matter. He was not happy about being employed to spy on Ralph, nor to act as nursery nanny to the young man, but if he wanted to keep his position in the Tandy house, he would have to do as he was bid. He was to watch Ralph and make sure he did not fall in with cardsharps or venture into gambling dens. He was to report immediately to Mr Tandy if this was to happen, or if he suspected it was happening.

‘Don’t let him out of your sight,’ had been Mr Tandy’s injunction.

‘I cannot be expected to be his keeper,’ Henry had protested. ‘He will not stand for it. He is not a child.’

‘He acts like one,’ growled Mr Tandy. ‘I pay the boy’s bills, his allowance, his *debts*. He’ll do as he’s bid. I want him watched. I want a weekly report. You can write in English, can’t you?’

‘I can, sir.’

‘Here’s some money.’

‘An advance on my wages, sir?’

‘No. Expenses. You’ll be travelling about after him, I dare say. But I want him watched.’

Easier said than done, mused Henry, turning over the conversation in his mind as he took the stairs up to Ralph’s rooms on the third floor, only to find that he was not there. The banyan robe Ralph had worn down to breakfast was discarded on the floor of the dressing room. Henry picked it up and hung it back in the clothes press. He straightened up the rest of the room, as a valet ought to do, pondering all the while how he was supposed to watch over someone who could come and go at will. Ralph could be anywhere in the unfamiliar metropolis. Henry fetched his coat and hat and returned downstairs. Symes, the head footman, had just closed the front door after receiving a card for the mistress.

‘Mr Symes,’ Henry began politely. ‘Would you happen to know where Master Ralph is gone to?’

Symes, who was tall, looked down snootily at him. It amused Henry that in a house where the mistress never “stood on ceremony” the servants could be more formal and snobbish than their mistress.

‘His father bids me to find him,’ Henry added pleasantly, ignoring the footman’s coolness. He recalled Ralph telling him that Symes was a fount of all knowledge – only one had to pay a shilling for each drop. Henry took out one of the coins Mr Tandy had endowed him with. He still had to look closely at the English coins to see what he had, and he could see that he held a shilling.

At the mention of Mr Tandy and the sight of the shilling, Symes became more helpful. ‘Master Tandy said he was off to Fox’s for some breakfast.’

‘And where is Fox’s?’

Symes wrinkled his nose, as though he disapproved of his young master’s choice. ‘The Foxhole in Drury Lane.’

‘Thank you, Mr Symes. If the mistress enquires after me, assure her I am about Master Tandy’s business.’

IT TOOK Henry a good deal of time to find The Foxhole, which was tucked away in the seedier quarter of Drury Lane. It certainly was a hole, was Henry’s first thought as he entered the dim and smoky inn, stepping gingerly over the dirty straw on the floor. He blinked in the gloom, adjusting his eyes to scan the clutch of rickety tables and benches, looking for a large, fair-haired man in a sulk.

The Foxhole was quiet at that time of the morning; one man was sprawled on a bench snoring, no doubt he had been there all night, and one greasy table housed three men in poorly cut coats, sharing a jug of gin. But in the farthest part of the inn, a gleam of fair hair shone in the gloom. Ralph was sitting with his back against the wall and his feet on a chair smoking a cigarillo with a moody air. He looked surprised to see Henry when he appeared at the table, and then almost pleased. His eyes were red, no doubt a result of the half empty jug at his elbow.

‘You come looking for me?’ Ralph said. ‘Not in the briars again, am I? Pater’s not dagger-drawing or in a rum pucker about something else?’ Henry’s look of confusion prompted Ralph to speak in regular English. ‘Pa send you to find me? Am I in trouble over something else?’

‘Not at all,’ said Henry. ‘I came to find you because we must visit the tailors. Your wardrobe is to be refreshed, Master Tandy.’

Ralph groaned. ‘Is that all?’

‘It means a deal to your mother,’ Henry said lightly.

‘Turn me into a new man,’ said Ralph bitterly. ‘Why can’t I go on as I am? I’m not that bad a fellow, Mr Brown. I don’t get up to some of the rigs and rows that other men do. I’m not one for kennel raking strangers for sport nor getting into mills. Don’t even go wenching. Don’t have the stomach for it. I hear the other fellows talking about

women and what they do with them, and I think of Ma and Tiff, and I think that all them women will be someone's ma someday or is some fellow's sis.' Ralph sighed deeply, his cigarillo turning to ash between his fingers. 'I'm a failure, Mr Brown. I might not be rotten, but I am a failure.' His shoulders drooped.

Henry took out his pocket handkerchief and placed it on the wooden seat before sitting down opposite the tipsy Ralph. 'I quite agree, sir.'

'Agree what?' said Ralph, his chin lifting.

'I agree that you're not rotten. You haven't found your way yet, is all. How old are you, Master Tandy?'

'Nineteen.' Ralph reached a hand for the gin jug, and Henry plucked it out of his reach.

'You don't want to drink this, sir,' Henry assured him politely. 'It will rot your guts and, more importantly, it will ruin your palate. One of the greatest gifts, Master Tandy, is to be able to savour the very best of the comforts life has to offer. If one wishes to know the pleasure of an excellent wine or spirits, one must forgo cheap gin and its bedfellows. The same principle applies to food and clothing and friends...and ladies. And you have already the wisdom to stay away from the feminine pleasures gained too cheaply by your acquaintance. This assures me that you, Master Tandy, have the makings of an excellent and wise man.'

'I do?' Ralph dropped his cigarillo with a puppy-like yelp as it burned down to his fingers.

'Is there somewhere *clean* where we can drink coffee?' Henry enquired. 'And it must be good coffee.'

Ralph glanced round, seeming to see where he was for the first time. 'There's a place in the Strand said to have the best coffee. Frenchie runs it,' he added.

'That explains its excellence,' said Henry, getting up and removing his handkerchief. Ralph fumbled in his pocket for some coins and tossed them down on the table, lumbering obediently after Henry like a great, fair-haired bear.

THE COFFEE WAS EXCELLENT, and it was a pleasure to Henry to be able to snatch a conversation in French with the owner. Ralph sobered up after two cups and a slab of meat pie. Henry, who had made a good breakfast that morning, nevertheless enjoyed his little madeleine cake for the sake of tasting something familiar. The price of it was shocking, but flour was expensive.

'Now then,' Henry began when Ralph was looking more like his buoyant self again. 'How did you enjoy your family's success at Vauxhall?'

‘Famous,’ said Ralph. ‘Proper rum-ti-tum night. Ma like a duchess, Tiff getting ogled by Prinny, and there’s no danger there, for he only likes the matrons. You should have seen everyone goggling at us, but I kept my head, just as you said, Mr Brown. I pretended as though I was old Forster with his snooty look, standing as stiff as a general, and by Jupiter if it didn’t work!’ Ralph laughed and seemed restored to humour. But Henry’s next question put him directly back into a sulk.

‘I suppose there’s little truth in the rumours about your gambling?’ Henry enquired lightly.

‘Pa been prosing on about me, has he?’

‘Fatherly concern, is all.’

Ralph made a little snort. ‘Everyone plays. He wants me to act like a gent. Well, the bigger the gent, the deeper they play. At Whites they play for houses and estates, not just a few hundred guineas, that’s just jacks and baubees to them.’ He saw Henry’s puzzled look. ‘Ha’pennys and farthings,’ he explained.

‘So your father paid off a debt of a few hundred guineas?’

Ralph shifted in his seat. ‘Few hundred here, few hundred there. You know how it is.’ His discomfort exploded into indignation. ‘By Jove, if I had any other way to make some blunt, I would! But how else am I to go about it when the old pater won’t let me so much as sniff the air of his mills!’

‘You would like to learn your father’s business?’

‘Course I would. I’m to inherit, ain’t I? I should know how it all works. He thinks I’m a loose screw, thinks I’m a regular gudgeon, not good enough to learn the business. Only good enough to squire Ma and Tiff about and get leg-shackled to some heiress, but I tell you I ain’t getting swished at nineteen, nor twenty, nor any time soon. I want to kick up a while.’

‘You are rather young to be thinking of marriage,’ Henry agreed, thinking that Ralph still had a good deal too much of the boy in him to be ready for the responsibilities of a family of his own. ‘You say you want to make money? Any particular reason why?’

‘To be independent. To not have it hanging over me all the time that I shall have my allowance, my inheritance cut off if I don’t toe the line. And,’ he added in a softer tone, ‘I should like Pa to see that I’m not a bacon-brained care-for-nothing.’

‘I see.’ Henry thought hard for some minutes as Ralph stirred more sugar into his third cup of coffee. ‘Perhaps you need a venture that does not involve gambling.’

‘Such as?’

‘A business of your own.’

‘Doing what?’

‘Find something that people wish to buy which is not in existence.

I trust you have no objection to being in trade? I know it's looked down upon by the society you are aspiring to. You would have to keep it quiet while you attend the season.'

'A secret venture?' said Ralph, his eyes lighting up. 'A double life? By day a sharp-set business fellow, and by night a regular dapper dog of the first stare.'

'How much money do you have at your disposal for capital?'

Ralph's eyes dimmed again. 'No more than a pair of ponies.'

'Ponies?'

'Fifty quid.'

'What is it you English say about acorns?'

'Acorns?'

'Small acorns growing into great oaks.'

But the proverb was lost on Ralph, who said that going into the tree nursery business wasn't for him.

'Keep your eyes and ears open for ideas,' Henry counselled his sobered-up charge. 'And keep hold of your *pair of ponies*. That's your seed money. No gambling it away.'

Ralph agreed and decided they should celebrate the idea of his new secret business with a few more macarons before they set off for the tailors.

MR TANDY DID NOT STAY for dinner, for he said the house was no quieter than his mills, with the door knocker going like a clacker and a steady stream of cloth dealers and haberdashers and seamstresses arriving through the trade entrance. He had business in town and then he would return to his offices and call again in a couple of weeks to see how they all did. Mrs Tandy and Tiffany protested at such a short visit, and begged him to stay longer, but both gave a sigh of relief when he had gone and the house resumed a cheerful air. Laura had seen this pattern of family dynamics many times over the three years she had been with the Tandys. She was as glad as the family that Mr Tandy's visits were always quick; he seemed to swoop down on them when they were not expecting him, make a good deal of squawking, ruffle Ralph's feathers, and then fly away directly.

But she sympathised with Mr Tandy's statement about the noise; the house was teeming with people. Mr Brown had directed Mrs Tandy to send for an army of seamstresses and cloth dealers to come and attend upon her to discuss fabrics and designs for the new wardrobes. Time was pressing, for it was nearly mid-May, and Tiffany had but a month left to make her match.

'La, I'm mortal glad the weather will be getting warmer,' Mrs

Tandy was saying, fingering the delicate muslins that were the height of fashion. There were bolts of fabrics covering every surface of the saloon. The haberdasher and his apprentice were looking punch drunk with happiness at the vast quantities being ordered. 'A girl would catch cold in such flimsy fabric,' Mrs Tandy said, still examining the muslins. 'Why, a puff of wind would quite carry it away.'

'It's the fashion, Mama,' Tiffany assured her. 'And one wears an under gown beneath it. Look, the muslin goes over the silk like this, see.'

'The silk is as thin as a whisker,' marvelled Mrs Tandy. 'You must wear good flannel petticoats, like I do. I shall tell Mr Brown I don't want my girl catching cold. Think how many evening parties you would miss were you laid up with the sniffles. Think of your nose, dear.'

Tiffany gave Laura a look of appeal.

'Flannel undergarments would spoil the line of the gowns, Mrs Tandy,' Laura said. 'Tiffany will have plenty of wrappers to keep her warm when she drives out or is travelling between engagements. I have seen Mr Brown's designs for coats and evening cloaks, and there are plenty of warm furs and plush velvets.'

Mrs Tandy seemed a little satisfied with this, though she said it pained her to put fashion above comfort.

'But, Mama, the Season is *all* about fashion. We are in safe hands with Mr Brown, are we not?'

Mrs Tandy agreed that they were, for the man was a marvel, even if he did not approve of tartans or spangles.

Mr Brown had just returned home with Ralph. Laura found that she was very aware of his every movement. He was now busy discussing designs with a young seamstress. The sad, haunted look in his eye that she had caught a few times was now replaced with a glow of purpose and interest. The seamstress was watching his face with admiration as he spoke, rather than looking at the drawings he was showing her. He caught the seamstress's eye and smiled back. Laura felt a pang of something hot and sharp.

'Laura, dear, what are you scowling at?' Tiffany's voice jolted Laura back to the business of sprigs and tambours. She shook her head to clear it of the strange thoughts assailing her. 'I was not scowling, only thinking.'

'You were scowling.' Tiffany looked in the direction of Mr Brown and the pretty young seamstress, and a little scowl troubled her own fair brow. 'Laura, dear, I hope you're not getting any ideas about Mr Brown. He is here for one month, and then he will be gone again.'

Laura tried to laugh at such a ludicrous notion, but the sound came out tight and off key. 'What a foolish notion,' she said.

Tiffany eyed her closely, looking strangely like her father with his hawk-eyed discernment for one moment. Then her face cleared, and she said, 'It is a foolish notion. My plain, sensible little Laura getting romantical over a penniless stranger.'

Laura was going to protest that Mr Brown did not feel like a stranger, but she decided it would be best to say nothing other than a firm, 'Quite so.' She looked resolutely back at the swatches of fabric and said decidedly, 'This one,' holding up an embroidered Indian muslin. 'The little forget-me-nots would look adorable on you.'

Tiffany smiled. 'They would, wouldn't they? I wonder if I can have sequins added.'

The discussion was interrupted by a shriek from Mrs Tandy. Every eye in the room turned to the lady of the house. She waved a large white card triumphantly. 'It came!' she cried. 'The Petty-Blount ball!'

Tiffany dropped the forget-me-not muslin and clapped her hands with glee.

'When is this ball?' Mr Brown said, crossing the saloon from the far end where the seamstresses were grouped.

Mrs Tandy glanced at the invitation. 'Friday!'

'Which Friday?' Mr Brown said warily. 'Ballgowns are a deal of work.'

'This Friday.'

'Cieux!' he turned to look back at the seamstresses. 'We shall have to work day and night to get Miss Tandy's ballgown ready in time.'

'You can do anything, Mr Brown,' Mrs Tandy said trustingly. 'You are our miracle worker.' She turned back to Tiffany. 'My beautiful girl is going to dance with the *prince* at the ball!'

LAURA FELT OBLIGED to offer her services in helping the seamstresses with their monumental task. Assembling the most exquisite ballgown ever to be seen in London in three days was truly a Herculean endeavour. The work carried on through the night with the exhausted seamstresses taking turns to snatch a couple of hours of sleep. Mrs Tandy promised them all five pounds each and ordered the kitchen to keep them supplied with coffee and sandwiches. Five pounds was more than six months' wages to a seamstress, so the mood was a merry one, despite the lack of sleep.

FRIDAY EVENING CAME. There was nothing for Laura to do, for a professional hairdresser was to arrange the ladies' hair, and the chief seamstress was to dress Tiffany. Laura went to her own room to dress. She would wear the gown Mr Brown had trimmed for her on the night of the Vauxhall outing. It was a little plain for a ballroom, but she would only be sitting with the chaperones and matrons. She paused on

entering her bedroom. There was a new gown hanging from the dressing screen in the corner. A gown of pale gold.

It was nothing as grand as Tiffany's; it was far more modest, but it was so very elegant, and would not look out of place in a ballroom.

She touched the soft tulle of the overgown and stroked the silky gold ribbon under the fashionably high waistline. Where had it come from, this beautiful dress? She had not seen any of the seamstresses working on it. She stood gazing at it in wonder until a gentle tap at her door jolted her out of her daze. One of the young seamstresses put her head round the door to say, 'I was sent to dress you, Miss. And you're to go to Monsieur Faberge in milady's chamber after to get your hair done.'

Tiffany WAS a joy to behold in her pearly satin undergown and the cloud-like muslin with white silk roses at the shoulder and neckline, and a train of Valenciennes lace. Mr Brown had ordered six tiny diamond clasps to be arranged in Tiffany's hair, hinting at a tiara, but without ostentation. She also wore one single diamond pendant at her throat in the plainest of settings, but it was a sizeable diamond and it flashed magical lights around her face, while the secret diamonds in her hair made a glinting crown appear and disappear as the lights overhead caught them.

Laura marvelled that the scores of hours devoted to the production of the ballgown should result in something that looked so simple, so effortless. Every seam was invisible, the fabric draped to fall in perfect lines. The effect was a heady mix of pure elegance and understated luxury. There was nothing showy or vulgar. Tiffany was as fresh and pure as a lily-of-the-valley; no man looking at her could mistake her for anything other than a bride-to-be, which was the exact look Mr Brown had sought to achieve. Miss Tiffany Tandy was to be presented to the *beau monde* of London as the most desirable heiress of the season.

Mrs Tandy was draped in topaz velvet with matching turban and emeralds. She had tried to sneak a little face paint past the critical eye of Mr Brown, but to no avail. He ordered her to remove it. A fine dusting of the lightest powder was all he would permit. There were to be no heavy perfumes, no large reticules, no gaudy fans. All was restrained elegance. All was of the highest quality, and of the simplest presentation.

Ralph beamed round at everyone, and all agreed with him that he was looking very 'dapper dog' in his evening suit of black breeches and swallowtails, with his white cravat, gold clocked stockings and dancing pumps with gold buckles. Laura was pronounced a spark and a dasher by Ralph, Mrs Tandy said she was a credit to the family and

would be fending off the gents as much as Tiffany, but it was obvious by the way she looked at Tiffany that she did not really believe this.

Tiffany, whose satisfaction in her own appearance made her generous to all, said that she had never seen Laura in such good looks before. But Laura only cared about one person's opinion. Mr Brown's attention had been absorbed in making the final changes to Tiffany's gown, and fencing with Mrs Tandy over the little additions she kept trying to sneak into her own ensemble. Tiffany had said it was a pity Mr Brown could not go with them to the ball, and Mrs Tandy agreed, saying that she was not one to stand on ceremony, and did not see why Mr Brown should not have the pleasure of a night out after all his hard work, but Mr Brown settled the matter by saying that it was kind of them to treat him with such generosity, but it was not the thing for valets or designers to appear in public.

The carriage was announced. Mr Brown demonstrated to Tiffany how to loop her train just so over her arm, and the excited party trooped out. It was only in the final minute, as Laura waited in the hall to follow the family out that she snatched a moment to say to Mr Brown, 'Do I have you to thank for the design of this beautiful gown?'

He bowed. 'It was my pleasure, Miss Dymond.'

A surge of ridiculous happiness ran through her.

'You must share in the family glory,' he said. 'It would mar the effect if you did not.'

Her happiness drained away. She was dressed only to make the family look well. How foolish of her to think it was anything more. The gown was nothing personal. It had been her own imagination that had made her feel that the dress had been made so perfectly to her form and colour and taste, as though someone had designed it with feeling and affection.

'Thank you again,' she said, remembering her manners despite her swirling emotions. She turned away quickly, not wishing to betray any of her feelings. But then a thought struck her and she turned back to say, 'Who made it? I should like to thank them.' Some young seamstress must have been sat alone somewhere in another room busily stitching away while the rest worked on the grand ballgown.

'I made it myself.'

A renewed surge of happiness. But there was no time to say another word, for Ralph returned from assisting his mother and sister into the carriage and put out his arm, saying, 'Come along, Miss Laura. Do you know how to waltz? I hear these Petty-Blounts are a fast set.'

Laura threw a look of gratitude back at Mr Brown as she was escorted away. He smiled in reply, but it was not his dazzling smile that he gave her; it was not the one that he reserved for Tiffany. It was

only his quiet, second-best smile.



MORTON BUTTERNOCK SURVEYED the ballroom as though he were at Tattersall's, surveying the horses on offer and discerning between the prime cattle and the rips.

He had been in town almost a fortnight now. The rooms he had rented were acquired without deposit on the expectation that he was about to become a wealthy baron. The new wardrobe he enjoyed was all on credit on the expectation of his fast-approaching wealth. It was wonderful, Mr Butternock thought, how jewellers and watchmakers, shoemakers and hatmakers fawned over you and were pleased to give you everything when it was known you were about to be catapulted into the ranks of the aristocracy. But best of all was the deference that the mothers of marriageable daughters showed him. He had never been popular before, and though he was not ugly, he had never been an object of desire among the ladies, but now all that was changed.

Miss Earnshaw saw him from across the room and fluttered her eyelashes at him over her fan. It was a pity, Morton thought, that her nose was so very long and her waist so very thick, for she had a dowry of thirty thousand, and thus was very much in the running. In fact, she was leading the race at present, for though she was of untitled aristocracy she was the wealthiest contender thus far. The Honourable Phoebe Hamilton, who was trying to catch his eye from across the room, would bring good connections, but only a measly ten thousand, and nothing further to inherit, for she had a slew of brothers. If only he could find a well-dowered lady who was also easy on the eye. Someone like that exquisite beauty coming through the door of the ballroom.

He watched the new arrival, aware that every eye in the room was turned to her. What a dazzler she was, petite and dainty as a thoroughbred. She was not wearing a deal of jewels, but the one diamond at her perfect little throat was a good size, and if that was her mother behind her, well, the mother had a splendid set of emeralds on. Was the chubby, fair-haired youth her betrothed, he wondered? But, no, there were no rings on their fingers, and now that he looked more closely, the fellow was very like the lady in emeralds: same height and broad chest, same yellow hair. There was an unmistakeable family likeness. There was a dark-haired girl with them too, dressed in a golden gown, well looking enough but not a dazzler like the vision in white. Probably a companion or poor relation, but the party did look fine; they *radiated* money.

He saw Lady Fudgely, whom he had met two nights ago. She had a niece she was trying to puff off, but with only six thousand and a squinty eye the girl had no hope. 'Lady Fudgely,' he said in his best voice, making his bow. 'Delighted to see you again. I hope your lovely niece is with you?'

'She's dancing with Captain Finlay,' said Lady Fudgely. 'I hope you'll be dancing yourself, Mr Butternock?'

'Indeed I will. Tell me, who is that family just arriving?'

Lady Fudgely pursed her lips. 'Why, it's only that Tandy family. Cits, you know. I don't know what things are coming to when Lady Petty-Blount invites parvenus to her ball. All because Mr Brummell pronounced them fine looking, suddenly everyone is talking of them.'

'Where did the money come from?' Morton asked.

Lady Fudgely sniffed. 'A mix of speculation and *manufacturing*. Mills, I believe.'

'How much money?' Morton said, getting to the most important question.

Another sniff. 'The son will inherit. The daughter is said to have fifty thousand.'

Morton's heart beat a little faster.

'Ah, here is Fenella,' said Lady Fudgely. 'The quadrille is ended. It is a cotillion next, Mr Butternock.'

But Morton was no longer attending to anything Lady Fudgely said, and he certainly was not going to ask Fenella Fudgely to dance now he had set his sights on the grand prize.

Who could introduce him to the beautiful Miss Tandy with fifty thousand pounds? That was Morton's chief question. He had not been in town long, and had little acquaintance. He could hardly ask the mama's and their daughters who were pursuing him to make an introduction, and to make matters more difficult Miss Tandy was immediately surrounded by admirers; every man wanted to dance with the newest beauty. He circled and hovered and watched the family group closely, looking for opportunity. Finally his chance came, for he saw that Mrs Tandy, that regal looking matron in the magnificent emeralds, had dropped her fan. It was lying under her rout chair on the floor. He manoeuvred into position, edging nearer to the back of Mrs Tandy's chair. He had to drop to his hands and knees at the last, that he might reach for the fan.

'Ho, what's this?' bellowed a youthful voice. 'Did you bring your lapdog, Mama, for there's something crawling under your chair!' A burst of laughter greeted Morton as he stood up, flushed with humiliation.

'Your voice is carrying very loudly, sir,' said the slim young woman in gold. 'Mr Brown said—'

‘Brown ain’t here,’ cried the young man. ‘But who’s this fellow, creeping about under Ma’s chair?’

Morton made a very low bow to Mrs Tandy. ‘I believe this belongs to you.’ He presented the fan on his palms. ‘I saw it under the chair.’

‘Why, thank you, sir,’ said Mrs Tandy. ‘That is mortal kind of you.’

Morton blinked at the strong northern accent in Mrs Tandy’s voice. It contrasted with her duchess-like appearance. He wondered if the fair daughter spoke in the same manner. Surely not. She was too perfect to speak in anything other than silvery tones.

‘But it’s not my fan, sir.’

‘It’s not? It was under your chair—’

Mrs Tandy wagged her own painted fan at him. ‘That’s Laura’s fan.’

‘Laura?’ Laura must be the young lady in gold seated on the other side of Mrs Tandy.

‘It is mine,’ admitted the young lady in gold. ‘Thank you, sir.’ She plucked the fan from him with a little bow of the head.

‘Laura, you must dance with him for finding your fan,’ said Mrs Tandy.

‘Mrs Tandy, we have not been introduced,’ Laura said in a low voice. ‘Recall what Mr Brown said about standing on ceremony?’

‘Oh, faugh to ceremony!’ said Mrs Tandy. ‘Introduce yourself, my good man.’

What a vulgar woman, thought Morton, but he was not going to let this opportunity pass by. He would get at the daughter one way or another. ‘Morton Butternock, at your service, ma’am,’ he said with another bow.

‘Mrs Tandy,’ said his new acquaintance. ‘This here is my son, Ralph, and my daughter’s companion, Laura.’

‘Miss Dymond,’ said the young lady, with a little flush at her mistress’s lack of etiquette.

‘Miss Dymond, would you honour me with the next dance?’ Morton said, deciding that this companion would be a useful source of information regarding Miss Tandy.

‘I am not sure if I should dance,’ said Miss Dymond, casting a glance about the room. ‘I don’t see other companions dancing.’

‘Faugh to not dancing,’ said Mrs Tandy. ‘Tis a ball. No young person should be at a ball and not dance. What say you, Mr Buttercrook?’

‘I quite agree, ma’am,’ said Morton, refraining from correcting her pronunciation of his name. He would not get off on the wrong foot by any means, for she might well be his future mother-in-law.

Mrs Tandy again urged Miss Dymond, so she accepted with a quiet word of thanks, and took Morton’s arm to join the reel that was about

to begin. Morton hated reels. He did not jig or skip well. He recalled a young wench laughing at him at his first country dance and saying he danced like a bobbing Guy on a stick. Dancing made him feel foolish. But somehow, he must get at Miss Tandy, sweep her off her feet, and carry her away to Eastersham, where he would never have to dance a reel again.

The reel left him panting slightly and wishing he had not had his corset tied quite so tightly. Miss Dymond was pleasant, if aloof, but there had been little opportunity to talk during the dance. He spied Miss Tandy disappearing into the refreshment room on the arm of a military man, and gasped out an offer of lemonade, to which Miss Dymond agreed.

Once inside the busy refreshment room he forgot about lemonade as he sought to edge closer to Miss Tandy, but every time he neared her some oaf or pullet got in his way and his quarry escaped.

Finally Miss Dymond said, 'We have passed the lemonade server four times, Mr Butternock.'

The elusive Miss Tandy disappeared back into the ballroom and Morton ground his teeth in frustration, mumbled a word of apology to the waiting Miss Dymond, then barked at the server to be quick with the lemonade.

THE BALL WAS DECLARED a roaring success by the Tandy siblings and their mother, even though the Prince of Wales had only made a fleeting appearance and had not danced due to indigestion.

Despite getting home at four in the morning, the ladies managed to rise and breakfast before noon, for there was all the excitement of wondering who would call in person that day. Some of Tiffany's dance partners had already sent cards and flowers by their servants, but some of the younger men were expected to call. Not that Tiffany had favoured any one man in particular last night, but she had enjoyed almost all her dance partners, for they had been attentive and admiring.

'But not one of them titled,' was Mrs Tandy's one lament as the subject of Tiffany's beaux continued to be discussed. The ladies arranged themselves in the drawing room, where they had decided to receive their callers. 'How is it that all the lords are either married or over fifty? Very disagreeable of them.'

'There was a deal of talk over a Mr Butternock,' said Tiffany. She was trying to thread a tapestry needle so she might appear to be at her embroidery when the gentlemen came, but as she never did embroider, she was struggling, so Laura took it from her. 'He is said to

be heir to a title and estate. I think he is accounted quite the catch of the season.'

'But, la, what a name,' Mrs Tandy said. 'How should you care for being a Mrs Buttercrook, my dear?'

Tiffany pulled a little face. 'I wonder that he did not ask me to dance.'

'I don't think he could get near you,' said Laura, handing back the threaded needle.

'You danced with him, Laura,' said Mrs Tandy. 'What did you think of him?'

'Oh, well enough. It is difficult to gauge the measure of a person during a reel, for you cannot talk much. The best I can say is...' Laura had to think hard to think of something complimentary. There was nothing very *bad* about him. It was just that he did not look one directly in the eye when he spoke, not like Mr Brown did. And his voice slightly grated on her ears, but perhaps that was because she was comparing it to Mr Brown's pleasant tone.

'Well?' prompted Tiffany. 'What is the best you can say of this Mr Butternock?'

'Um...he is of a good middling height. Not too tall, not too short.' Laura gave a little shrug.

'And what is the worst you can say of him?' teased Tiffany.

Laura did not have to think hard. 'He's rather abrupt with servants.' She could have added more, but the butler came in to present a card with the corner turned down. Mrs Tandy took it and exclaimed, 'Mr Buttercrook!'

Mr Butternock was admitted to the ladies, and made his entrance, bowing low, first to Mrs Tandy, then to Laura, and then he paused expectantly.

Laura saw the expectancy and said quietly to Mrs Tandy, 'Mr Butternock has not yet been introduced to Miss Tandy, ma'am.'

'Fie, we don't stand on ceremony in this house,' said Mrs Tandy. 'Mr Buttercrook, this is my daughter, Theodosia.'

'Your servant, Miss Tandy,' said Mr Butternock, making a third formal bow. 'Delighted to make your acquaintance. I regret that I had not the pleasure of dancing with you last night, for you were surrounded with admirers the whole evening.'

'That is very true,' agreed Tiffany.

'How is it I did not see you at Lady Aisling's breakfast nor at the Pinkerton's musicale?' Mr Butternock enquired.

'We were not fashionable then,' said Mrs Tandy. 'We have only been fashionable the past week. I suppose you know everybody, Mr Buttercrook?'

'Not at all, ma'am. This is my first season in town. Thus we share

something in common,' he said, looking at Tiffany with an inclusive smile. 'But you, Miss Tandy, have much more advantage than poor me.'

'How so?' Tiffany asked, pulling her needle through her embroidery, and frowning as her thread knotted.

'You have your family about you, whereas I have no one, save my uncle, who, alas, shall not be with us for long. Then shall fall upon me all the responsibility of managing his great estate as his heir.'

How tactless, Laura thought, watching Mr Butternock pull a rueful face.

'So you will not always be a Mr Butternock?' said Tiffany, managing to tug her knot free with some effort.

'Soon, should it please the fates, I shall inherit the name of Lord Lansdowne of Eastersham Park.'

'Where is Eastersham Park?' Tiffany asked. 'I have not heard of it, so I think it cannot be in the northern counties.'

'You are exactly right, Miss Tandy. Eastersham Park is in Sussex, a delightful county of great verdure and beauty. Do you care for the country?'

'I cannot say. We have always lived in towns.'

'Yet I have little difficulty envisioning you as a baroness of the county, directing her country manor and estate,' said Mr Butternock softly.

Heavens! thought Laura, her eyes widening. Why did not the man just get down on one knee and propose there and then! She looked at Tiffany to see what she thought of this over-fast flattery, but Tiffany's head was bent over her work and her face could not be read. Mrs Tandy was smiling benignly on the young couple.

'Do you attend the opera ball on Friday, Miss Tandy?' was the eager swain's next sally.

'I believe so, Mr Butternock. Are we to go to the opera ball, Mama?'

'To be sure we are, my love, for the committee granted us a box, and you have that new opera dress with the gold and blue embroidery that cost a guinea a yard.'

'Ah well,' said Tiffany with a little laugh to cover her embarrassment, 'if I have an opera gown, then it is a settled thing that I shall be there.'

'Then may I take the very great liberty of begging your hand for the first dance, Miss Tandy?' Mr Butternock clasped his hands together in entreaty. 'If I do not secure you now, I shall be in danger of being disappointed a second time.'

'Very well, Mr Butternock. I shall save the first dance for you.'

Mr Butternock's gush of thanks was interrupted by the arrival of

Captain Finlay, who had taken Tiffany in to supper last night. Mr Butternock was forced by the rules of convention to make his departure, for he had had his ten minutes, but he managed to secure Tiffany for a carriage drive later that day. He was too busy glaring at the captain to remember to bid Laura, the supposed object of his call, good bye.

IT WAS NOT ONLY the gentlemen who called; the hours of visiting between noon and four were filled with visitors. Young misses and fashion leaders alike came with one common goal: to find out who had made the gowns for the Tandys.

‘I never saw such an elegant train,’ Lady Faversham admitted to Mrs Tandy. ‘Who do you use? Is it Madame Quenelle? Or Villier? Or Santamaria?’

‘Such a *perfect* neckline,’ the fabulously rich Mrs Conningham-White lisped. ‘Who made it? Did you send to Paris?’

‘My *dear* Mrs Tandy,’ said Lady Partington sweetly, ‘my little Cecily is dying to know who made Miss Tandy’s exquisite ballgown. My dear Crispin was dazzled!’

Mrs Tandy’s maternal feelings struggled hard with this particular visitor, for on the one hand she had not forgotten that Lady Partington had assented publicly to her children being called mushrooms not so long ago. But it was not in her nature to hold a grudge, and she reasoned that it was enough that her children were now fashionable. Besides, Cecily Partington could not hold a candle to Tiffany, and Crispin Partington might inherit an earldom, but his father had gambled the family fortune away, so all these facts conspired to make her gracious to Lady Partington, even if she did agree with Ralph in thinking her sour-faced.

Mrs Tandy gave all her visitors the same answer: ‘No, we don’t use Quenelle nor Villier, and who would risk Paris with Boney still at large? We have our own dresser, a fashion designer, almost from Paris. A vastly agreeable young man, so talented, quite one of the family, for we don’t stand on ceremony in this house.’

‘But who is he?’ begged Lady Faversham. ‘Is he for hire?’ Mrs Conningham-White pleaded. ‘You retain your own designer?’ marvelled Lady Partington. ‘How very original.’

Mrs Tandy disappointed all her visitors by stating that her family designer was not at home and could not be presented at that time. He was busy with Mr Ralph Tandy, ordering footwear at Hoby’s. She promised them an introduction another day, and her visitors had to be satisfied with this. They pressed invitations on her and asked her to repeat once again the story of Beau Brummell and the Prince of Wales. The tale had grown as the days passed, and now Mr Brummell was not

merely quoted as saying that the Tandy's were a fine-looking family, but was credited with saying they were the *finest* looking family he had ever seen. And the Prince of Wales was reputed to not merely say that Tiffany was a fair miss whom he hoped to dance with, but had certainly said that Tiffany was the fairest miss he had ever seen, and he must dance with her or *die*.

The visiting hours ended, and the servants were enjoying having a good moan amongst themselves about being run off their feet with all the fetching and carrying of trays and the making of endless pots of tea and hurried baking of jam puffs, for there had never been so many visitors in one day. The pleasure of complaining was mixed with a feeling of pride that their employers were the most popular house in the square. They had long suffered from the disdain of the servants of the other houses; they were known as the Cit house, who never entertained anyone above the middling class, but now they could hold their heads up with the best of them.

Mrs Tandy, Tiffany and Laura were discussing all the invitations that had come that week when Mr Brown and Ralph returned from St. James's Street.

'Mr Brown!' hailed Mrs Tandy, waving a sheaf of cards. 'We shall need a mort of dresses for all these! Two breakfasts, a trip up the Thames, a picnic party, three routs, five dinners and a costume ball.'

Mr Brown made his usual polite entrance, then took up the cards from Mrs Tandy, running through them with a keen eye. 'I would not recommend the picnic, nor the Sedgwick dinner. Nor the Fanning rout, nor any of the dinners, save the one at Mrs Robinson's.'

Mrs Tandy stared at him.

'Not go to the dinner at Lady Marsham's?' Tiffany exclaimed.

'She is on the out,' said Mr Brown apologetically. 'There is a little scandal about to break. You will be saving yourself the trouble of having to decline the invitation after you had accepted it.'

'What scandal?' said Tiffany. 'She is the veriest of friends with Lady Waters, who is one of the leaders of the ton.'

'I don't like to repeat salacious gossip before ladies,' said Mr Brown apologetically.

'Fie, Mr Brown!' cried Mrs Tandy. 'You cannot tease us in this fashion! Out with it!'

'Suffice to say,' said Mr Brown, 'that Lady Waters and Lady Marsham will soon have a clash of interests with regard to Lady Waters' first footman.'

Ralph punctured the amazed silence with a guffaw. 'How do you find these things out, Brown? You're as sharp as a spy!'

Mr Brown gave an apologetic shrug. 'When one spends time amongst tailors' apprentices, seamstresses and servants, one cannot

fail to hear things.'

'But why can't we go to the Lemmington's picnic?' cried Mrs Tandy.

'And why should we only go to the dinner at Mrs Robinson's?' wondered Tiffany. 'Mrs Robinson is very plain, and only has a small house in Arlington, while the Lemmingtons have an enormous mansion in Mayfair.'

'Mrs Robinson may not be very rich,' said Mr Brown, 'but she is, how do you say it, *very good ton*. She is a wit, and has friends in high places, though she does not parade the fact. While the Lemmingtons are considered vulgar.'

'And what is wrong with the Fannings?' Mrs Tandy wanted to know.

'Nothing, ma'am. But you must be exclusive. You ought only to accept one invitation in five at the very most.'

'Exclusive?' repeated Mrs Tandy, looking round at her children and at Laura for an explanation of such a word. 'But we must get among society as much as we can. Show Tiffany and Ralph off to the world. Why should we turn down four out of five invitations?'

'The world will follow after *you*, Mrs Tandy, when it cannot easily get at you. To be exclusive is to make your presence of greater value. You will find that you get invitations to exclusive parties when you make yourself rare.'

Mrs Tandy did not look convinced.

'Let us do as Mr Brown says,' Tiffany suggested. 'What do you say, Laura?'

'I agree,' said Laura. 'Mr Brown has been right on every count thus far, has he not, ma'am?'

Mrs Tandy sighed and said that she supposed it was true. The butler came in at this moment to announce that Mr Butternock had arrived.

'Oh, is it five already?' exclaimed Tiffany. 'I'm to go out driving with him. You must entertain him, Mama, while I put my carriage dress on. Come and help me, Laura.'

Mr Butternock came in before Tiffany could make her escape. 'Please take tea with Mama,' she said charmingly, 'I shall be with you directly.'

Mr Butternock bowed again and turned to be introduced to Ralph and Mr Brown. Laura, just before leaving the room, was arrested for a moment by the sight of Mr Butternock and Mr Brown stood facing one another as they were introduced, for Mrs Tandy had no qualms in introducing a baron-to-be to a paid employee. But what had caught Laura's attention was not Mrs Tandy's social blunder, but the odd similarity between the two men shaking hands half-heartedly. They

were of similar height, though Mr Brown was slim and Mr Butternock on the stout side. But to see them facing one another was very like seeing a comic mirror image, for if Mr Brown's intelligent eyes had been drawn too close together, and if Mr Brown's neat, straight nose were narrowed into a hint of a beak, and if Mr Brown's well-shaped lower lip were exaggerated into more of a rubbery swell than a sensuous fullness, he and Mr Butternock could be as close in appearance as Ralph and Mrs Tandy were. Then Laura realised what she had just thought about Mr Brown's lips and was appalled at herself and fled the room.



PETER CANNING HAD BEEN Lord Lansdowne's butler for almost thirty years. He had never forgotten that dreadful day when the lovely Miss Elizabeth Lansdowne was discovered to have eloped to France with that dashing French vicomte.

Mr Canning was very proud of his position as butler to an excellent man. And he believed it was right for his master, a landed baron, to have pride in his family heritage and in his position in the world.

But pride had robbed Lord Lansdowne of his beloved daughter; he had not thought a French vicomte good enough for her. He had wanted her to marry an English lord, and who could blame him for wanting to keep her in the same country as himself? Lord Lansdowne was never the same again. Anger and grief and disappointed hopes robbed him of all joy. His strength waned, and now he was a lonely old man who kept to his bed, only visited by that dreadful nevvvy of his, that wily, cold-hearted Morton Butternock, who was drooling to get his hands on his uncle's wealth. Mr Canning shivered to think of him. What would life at Eastersham Park be like with him as lord and master?

He thought back to Mr Butternock's threat to him should he ever speak of the young man that called at Eastersham recently, claiming to be Lord Lansdowne's long-lost grandson.

Mr Canning brooded over this threat as he sat at his desk in his well-ordered little office. He'd had no peace since the day that young man had turned up, dripping with rain. He kept seeing that young face, hearing that lyrical accent that tinged the otherwise excellent English. The more Canning mused and brooded and pondered, the more convinced he was that the young visitor might very well be who he claimed. And what was he to do about it? The doctor had warned the staff that Lord Lansdowne was not to be excited or made anxious in any way. Canning had scribbled the name of Lord Lansdowne's lawyer onto a piece of paper, had put it in the young man's pocket as he left the house. He hoped the young man had found it and made his way to Mr Lingham's offices, but if he had, no news had come of it.

He looked down at the desk before him. He had been writing up accounts before his thoughts had carried him away. His quill dangled, forgotten, in his fingers, and a drop of ink fell from the nib to sully his neat rows of figures. He tutted at the blot and took a fresh sheet of paper that he might re-write the whole page; an ink spot, however small, would not do.

But instead of rewriting the figures, he began writing other figures. He calculated how much he had in savings, which was not much at all, for he had supported his elderly mother for many years until her death. He calculated how much he would need to eke out an early retirement if he lost his position at Eastersham and could not find another place due to Mr Butternock's malice. It would be difficult. He would be not be destitute, but he would be poor. He was fifty-six and did not relish the thought of his remaining years being spent scrimping over coal and meat in cramped quarters, without a pension.

He put down his quill and leaned back in his chair, staring at the numbers on the paper before him, weighing up past loyalties and future needs. Again he recalled the young man's brown eyes with the amber lights and the long lashes; Miss Elizabeth Lansdowne had been famous for her beautiful eyes. She had been painted by Reynolds, her portrait displayed in the drawing room until the master ordered it carried away to the attic, for it pained him too much to see it.

A soft tap at the door roused him. 'Come in,' he said.

It was the housekeeper, a woman in her late forties, who had worked companionably beside Mr Canning for many years. 'I brought the receipts you wanted for the monthly accounts, Mr Canning.' She came forward to put the papers on the desk. 'I've put them in date order.'

'Thank you, Mrs Robertson.'

Mrs Robertson glanced at the page of scribbled numbers, then glanced at Mr Canning with an enquiring look. 'Doing sums, Mr Canning?'

'Mrs Robertson, how do you feel about the prospect of Mr Butternock as master of Eastersham?'

Mrs Robertson made a little snort and crossed her hands primly over her starched, frilled apron. 'I shall be looking for another place, Mr Canning. That is how I feel about such a prospect. Though it will be a sad day when I have to leave this house.'

'We have been here a good long while, have we not?'

'We certainly have, Mr Canning. And we've worked hard and done an excellent job, if I say so myself.'

'Have you ever gambled, Mrs Robertson?'

'Certainly not. Unless you count playing loo for pennies gambling.'

Mr Canning picked up his sheet of scribbled figures and folded it up into a neat square. 'I am going to make a short journey into Town, Mrs Robertson. I shall only be gone one night. I trust you will oversee all things in my absence.'

'Is something wrong?' Mrs Robertson looked alarmed. 'If you don't mind my speaking plainly, Mr Canning, you've not been yourself for the past two weeks.'

‘You discern correctly. Something has been troubling me. My visit to Town will hopefully settle things one way or another.’

‘This is all very mysterious.’

‘It is best I speak of it to no-one for the time being. It may have the very best of consequences, or it may have the very worst. Or it may come to nothing. It is something of a gamble, I fear. But my conscience demands that I keep tidy accounts, Mrs Robertson. There shall be no blots on my conscience to offend me the rest of my days. I leave in the morning.’

‘What shall I tell the master if he asks for you?’

‘Tell him...urgent family business calls me away.’

‘But you don’t have any family. Or so I was led to believe. And you were never one to lie. This is more and more mysterious.’

Mr Canning did not reply. He did not wish to say that the urgent family business was that of his master’s family, rather than his own. He took a fresh sheet of paper to finish his accounting and dismissed the puzzled housekeeper with his usual gravity.



HENRY TOOK out the weekly report he had written, for it was the end of the second week since Mr Tandy had charged him with his task. He disliked having to do it. He felt he was being disingenuous in recording all Ralph's activities; he felt he was acting the part of a spy. But he could not afford to lose this position.

He ran his eye over the entry he had written for yesterday.

Thur. 20 May: Morning visits to Miss Shield in Charles St. and Lady Whitmore in Bryanston Sq.

Visit to bootmaker in St James's.

Refreshments at Limner's coffee house. Met by chance an acquaintance known only as 'Squib', invited to play cards that evening at a club called 'The Bearpit'.

Took Miss Soperford for a drive in Regents Park. Took tea with the Soperfords at Curzon St.

Return home to dine with the family.

Accompanied the family to the theatre in Drury.

Henry paused in his writing, wondering if he should rewrite the entry without the reference to Squib and The Bearpit. He wavered between his loyalty to Mr Tandy and his promise to Ralph not to speak of what had happened last night. He struggled for some minutes, then snatched up a new sheet of paper and rewrote the entry.

He leaned back in the library desk chair, recalling the events of the the night before, when Ralph had not come home in the family carriage from the theatre, and Henry had realised with a sinking feeling that he would have to go in search of him, as per Mr Tandy's orders.

Henry had donned a long coat, raising the collar to hide his lower face and pulling down his hat to shadow his upper face, and slipped out of the house through the servants' entrance, hailing a hackney carriage once he was clear of the square.

The driver had raised his eyebrows at Henry's request to be taken to The Bear Pit off Piccadilly but dropped him off outside a grimy looking building down an unlit street. Henry had stepped over the inebriated man lying in the doorway of the club, and politely declined the services of a lady in a flimsy gown. He'd picked his way through the broken bottles, rib bones and oyster shells on the floor, and enquired of a waiter where the gentleman's card game was. The waiter had thumbed in the direction of a room at the back.

Henry elbowed his way through a crowd busy laying bets on an

arm-wrestling match about to begin, ducked to avoid a blow being swung by a pair of brawlers, and finally spied Ralph at a table of card players. Ralph was wearing a battered old tricorne, tipped to the back of his head, and looked flushed from the jug of gin at his elbow, but also very pleased with himself; he was grinning inanely and rubbing his hands together as the dealer shuffled a deck, ready to start a new hand.

Henry tried to approach the table, but a burly man put a hand to Henry's chest, pushing him back. 'No cuttin' in,' said the man.

'I don't wish to play,' said Henry, brushing at his coat where the man's hand had touched it.

'Then clear off,' said the man, moving to block Henry's view of the table.

'Mr Tandy!' Henry called out, trying to step round the man. 'Mr Tandy!' he called louder.

Ralph heard his name the second time. 'Who wants me?' he called back.

'Shut yer mummer,' said one of the card players, 'game's about to start.'

'Is that you, Brown?' bellowed Ralph, standing up.

The players at the table all turned to see who was interrupting their game.

'Get 'im out of here,' snarled one of the players, a mean looking fellow in a mustard coat too big for him.

The burly man shoved Henry backward.

'The runners are after him,' said Henry, saying the first thing that popped into his head. 'They're on their way.'

'Runners?' said the snarling player, looking alarmed. 'Why? What's he done?'

'Quick!' called Mr Brown, still trying to dodge round his minder. 'Get out while you can, Mr Tandy!'

'It's all a slum,' said Ralph in a slurred voice. 'What's this about, Brown?'

'The game's up, Mr Tandy!' called back Henry. 'They know about the diamonds!'

'Diamonds?' said Ralph, grinning with a silly look on his face.

'Diamonds?' repeated the snarler.

'Your mother called the runners!' shouted Henry. 'Stole his mother's diamonds,' Henry informed the burly man.

'We don't want no pigs snaffling about,' said the snarly man. 'Get 'im out of 'ere. Check his pockets first.'

'My mother?' exclaimed Ralph. 'Hoy! Get your mawleys off me!' Ralph's coat pockets were being riffled. 'You said this was a tight and sound game, Squibs!' he shouted at the card player to his right.

‘You said he was a ripe pigeon,’ the snarly man snarled at Squibs.

Squibs began arguing with the snarly man, Ralph was bellowing at the man frisking his pockets and batting his hands away; Henry was still trying to dodge the burly minder who kept shoving him in the chest. A roar went up from the next room as the wrestling match turned into a fight, and the shout of ‘*Mill! Mill!*’ echoed through the rooms.

‘Stop that mill!’ the snarly man shrieked at the burly man. ‘They’ll knock the walls down again! Tell ‘em the runners are comin!’ Henry’s burly watchdog lurched off, giving Henry a shove on his way past. Henry recovered himself, yanked hold of Ralph’s collar, hissing into his ear, ‘We’ve got to go, Mr Tandy!’

‘But I’m winning,’ wailed Ralph scrabbling at the betting table for his money, most of which had already been scooped up by his fellow players before they dashed off to watch the fight or flee the inn, depending on their current standing with the law.

Ralph Tandy was a heavy man, and it was not easy for Henry to manhandle his charge through a crowd of drunken men cheering on a fight. Half the room was desperate to flee, having heard that the runners were coming, and Henry made use of the momentum of this surge of movement to push Ralph onwards,

‘Of all the scabby, shabby—!’ began Ralph, as they stumbled into the street.

‘This way,’ Henry said firmly, still holding his charge by the collar. Ralph’s precariously angled hat tipped from his head into the street.

‘Get off me!’ yowled Ralph, shaking himself loose. ‘Who the deuce do you think you are, you interfering clodpole, you upstart noddycok! Why, it’s the outside of enough! Where’s my hat?’ He lunged after the battered tricorne, snatching it up as though it were something of value.

They were clear of the inn now and had gained the main street where the parish lamps burned a moody yellow hue. Henry put the distance of a few paces between himself and Ralph, for his charge was flailing his arms like a windmill as his intoxicated brain and his indignant pride gave vent. ‘I’ll see you turned out of our house, you meddlesome sapskull, you foreign toad, you little *frog!*’

At this last insult Henry decided he’d had enough for one evening and resolved to leave Ralph Tandy to his own devices. He had done his duty in extricating him from a gambling den. If the silly pup wanted to go and get fleeced somewhere else, he, Henry, was not going to wander about the dregs of the city putting his own head at risk. There was something about crowds of men wild for violence that twisted his stomach; all his childhood nightmares of his father facing a screaming mob, yelling for his blood, baying for his head, stirred

uneasily. If Ralph Tandy wanted to wallow about in grimy inns with cut-throat men when he had all the comforts and privileges of a home and family and wealth, there was nothing he could do about it. The boy was a fool. Henry thrust his hands into the pockets of his overcoat and marched away.

‘Hey!’ wailed Ralph, and Henry heard heavy steps thudding behind him. ‘Wait up.’

Henry did not wait up. Ralph’s steps drew closer.

‘Brown, wait up! Lemme say something!’

‘What is it?’ Henry said over his shoulder, still walking.

Ralph spurred himself to catch up. ‘Hold on,’ he begged, panting now.

‘Firstly,’ said Ralph, gasping a little between words. ‘Sorry for calling you a clodpole and sapskull and all.’

‘I have no idea what a clodpole or a sapskull is, Master Tandy.’

‘And, sorry for calling you a frog.’

‘I do understand that particular insult.’

‘Well, deuced sorry for it. Won’t happen again.’

Henry gave a curt nod by way of acceptance of this apology.

‘Secondly...’

‘Yes?’

‘You’re going the wrong way.’

‘I am?’

‘It’s this way home.’

The two men walked side by side, Henry slowing his pace a little so Ralph could keep up. They walked in silence until they turned into Hanover Square. A private carriage rumbled by, bearing Mrs Tandy’s next door neighbour home. A lozenge of light pooled into the street as the door of the neighbouring mansion opened. A footman yawned in the doorway, then straightened his wig, ready to attend to his employer.

‘I’ve the deuce of a thirst,’ Ralph complained, breaking the silence.

‘I recommend seltzer water,’ said Henry dryly.

‘How did you find me tonight?’

‘I was with you when that *friend* of yours invited you to The Bear Pit.’

‘Ah, yes.’ They trudged the last few steps to the Tandy house.

‘You’re not going in wearing that thing on your head, are you?’ Henry said.

‘This?’ Ralph touched the brim of his hat tenderly. ‘My lucky hat.’

‘Lucky?’

‘Always wear it when I play at bones or cards. Belonged to King Nick.’

‘Who?’

'Famous sharp. Won himself a fortune. Went from Tothill slums to a tidy estate in Twickenham.'

'And he gave you his hat?'

'Not in person. Died before I was born.'

'You inherited it?'

'Bought it for eighteen shillings from an ancient fellow who worked at Tyburn.'

'Tyburn? Isn't that where they—?'

'Where they hung King Nick.'

'Hung him? I thought you said he rose to prosperity.'

'He did. Then lost it in a game and went back to Tothill. Got caught in some gaming racket that ended in some earl of somewhere being killed in a brawl.'

'And you consider him lucky?'

Ralph gained the first step up to the front door and turned, causing Henry to halt abruptly. 'Sorry about calling you names and so on.'

'You have already apologised, Master Tandy.'

'But really am deuced sorry. Shouldn't drink gin.'

'I told you that some time ago.'

'No more Blue Ruin for me.'

'That would be wise.'

'You accept my apology?'

'I accept your apology. It shall be as if the words were never said.'

'And you won't say nothing about it?'

'I won't tell your mother,' said Henry, guessing where Ralph's anxiety lay. 'Nor your father.'

Ralph let out a breath. 'You're a prime fellow, Mr Brown.' He gave a laugh, sounding more like his usual self. He mounted the remaining few steps. 'And what rumgumption! What bottom! Why, you stood up to Muggeridge and his henchman, spun them a Banbury tale about diamonds and runners!' Ralph laughed again, his voice ringing out into the empty street.

'How much of your *pair of ponies* did you lose?' asked Henry.

This sobered Ralph again. 'Still got one of 'em,' he said sadly. They reached the door and Henry lifted the lion-head knocker to rap quietly, not wishing to disturb the whole house, but Ralph's laughter must have alerted the waiting servant, for a bleary-eyed Symes opened the door immediately, locking it again when they were inside.

RALPH WAS STILL repentant next morning, lamenting the loss of his money, and grateful that Henry had pulled him out of the den in time. Henry was tying Ralph's neckcloth for him.

'What's it called?' Ralph asked, admiring his cravat knot in the mirror.

‘Trone d’Amour,’ murmured Henry, stepping back to assess the rest of Ralph’s outfit. The tailor he had given his designs to had done an excellent job. Ralph’s bulky form was balanced out by very discreet shoulder pads and large lapels to draw the eye upwards. The cravat was very important for the same purpose. Fortunately, Ralph had good legs, if a little thick in the thigh, but Henry had designed long, curved tails on Ralph’s coats to disguise this. Ralph refused to wear a corset and was ordered to restrain his portions at the dining table, but Ralph, ever in extremes, would eat barely anything at one meal, announcing himself on a slimming diet, only to eat twice his usual amount at the next meal to make up for his ravenous hunger. Moderation, thought Henry, was not one of young Ralph’s virtues.

‘I never got the hang of cravats,’ Ralph was saying, still admiring his reflection in his dressing room mirror.

‘I know,’ said Henry. ‘I recall those abominable spotted neckerchiefs you sported when first I met you.’

‘I miss a splash of colour. But I do look precise to a pin. Everyone tells me so.’ He puffed out his chest and sucked in his belly. ‘I think gin swells my guts,’ he said, watching his belly slouch back into roundness as he let it out again.’

‘Do the lower button up,’ Henry advised. Ralph obeyed and was satisfied with the improved silhouette this gave him.

‘Tis amazing,’ mused Ralph, ‘that something so simple as a smart cravat can make such a difference. Do you know, I spent hours trying to learn how to do knots and gave up in the end.’ Ralph’s eyes went suddenly vacant, as though he were seeing something inwardly. He blinked, then met Henry’s eyes in the mirror. Henry had been brushing the back of Ralph’s coat to remove any lint from the new fabric.

‘Do you know,’ said Ralph slowly, ‘I’ve had an idea. An actual idea.’

Henry waited patiently to hear what this actual idea was.

‘You said I must look for something that folk want that ain’t available, and supply it. That’s a business idea.’

‘Yes,’ agreed Henry. ‘It is.’

‘If there’d been such a thing as readymade cravats, I’d have bought them a long time ago,’ said Ralph, fingering the linen at his neck.

‘Readymade cravats?’

‘Yes. All tied up, in all the different knots they come in, and the knot sewed into place, invisible like, just like you manage to do when you sew things, and then one just pins it onto one’s stock – easy!’

Henry shrugged, not convinced, but Ralph was lit up with his new idea.

‘Will you make them?’ Ralph said.

‘Master Tandy, I have not time to make cravats.’ Ralph’s face fell. He looked so crushed that Henry feared he would be running off to the gin shop or gambling dens directly, so he added, ‘I could design them. And a seamstress could be hired to do the sewing.’

‘Yes!’ cried Ralph, his glow of enthusiasm returning. He rushed to the drawer where his pile of ironed and starched cravats lay in a neat pile. He shoved the cloths at Henry, saying, ‘Tie them up, all different. We’ll go out for linen and hire a sewer!’ He did a little jig on the spot. ‘I’ve never had a business idea before! A pony should buy plenty of linen and I’ll sell ‘em for – what? – ten bob each! I’ll be in clover in no time!’

‘I’m sorry to disappoint you, Mr Tandy, but today is my afternoon off,’ Henry reminded him. Mrs Tandy had said the previous day that he must do as Miss Dymond did and take every other Friday afternoon off.

Ralph was momentarily plunged back into a gin-drinking despair, so Henry promised he would seek out one of the seamstresses who had worked well on Miss Tandy’s ballgown. He would call on her during his afternoon off and see if her services could be engaged. Ralph was more than capable of purchasing his own linen. Ralph agreed to this, ignoring Henry’s recommendation that Ralph not lay out too much on this purchase, but try out his plan on a small scale to begin with. Ralph resumed pacing up and down his dressing room, animated and flushed, talking of patents, and Bond Street shops that would be falling over themselves to stock this revolutionary new article of menswear.

Henry wondered what he had unleashed.



RALPH BOUNDED AWAY to the linen merchants, and Henry finished up his own matters before taking his afternoon off. At noon, he donned his coat and hat and set out to enjoy his afternoon off. The day was pleasant, a late spring warmth finally banishing the grey sky over the city. He would go to that coffee-house in the Strand and enjoy the pleasure of chatting in French with the proprietor.

He caught sight of a slim figure in a familiar dark blue coat just turning the corner of the square, and he quickened his pace that he might catch her up. 'Miss Dymond!' he called. She looked back, a startled expression on her face, as though she had been lost in thought, but she waited for him to reach her. 'May I accompany you somewhere?' He put out an arm.

'Oh, how kind! But I am on my way to visit someone. A friend.'

'What direction do you take?'

'Oh,' she said hesitantly, 'I go...over the river.'

'Which bridge?'

'Why do you ask?' She looked oddly vexed.

'To determine if our paths lie together part of the way,' he said in a friendly tone. 'Not that my geography of the city is very good. I am still prone to taking wrong turns. I'm going to the Strand.'

She flushed and her eyes were too bright. What was wrong with the usually calm Miss Dymond? This visit must be very important.

'We could walk together as far as the Strand,' she said. 'Then I cross Blackfriars bridge farther on.'

'Excellent.' He held out his arm a second time. She smiled shyly and took it. 'Let me take that from you,' he said, relieving her of the empty basket on her arm and the umbrella in her other hand. 'I don't think there is much chance of rain today,' he observed, hooking the large, curved iron handle of the umbrella over his arm.

'I did not bring it for fear of rain.'

'I'm surprised Mrs Tandy lets you walk through the city alone,' he said as they set off.

'Mrs Tandy has said I may use the carriage or take one of the footmen. She is the kindest of employers.'

'She is very kind,' agreed Henry. 'But you do not take up her offer. You prefer to trust to your umbrella.'

'I do. I prefer to walk. And I don't need a footman to follow me.' She gave a small laugh. 'It's not as though I'm a grand lady. I am but a servant, and they walk about unaccompanied all the time.'

‘You are every inch a lady, Miss Dymond,’ said Henry. ‘Never think anything less of yourself.’

She did not reply. He glanced at her, but she had turned her head away as though to look at something across the street. ‘Tell me about yourself, Miss Dymond.’

‘What do you wish to know?’

‘Start at the beginning. Where were you born?’

‘A little town in Sussex. More of a village, really.’

‘You spent your childhood there?’

‘Yes.’

‘You were happy?’

‘Yes. Very.’

She was not very forthcoming. ‘Is it impertinent of me to ask such questions?’ he said. ‘Have I transgressed an English rule of etiquette?’

‘No, not at all.’ She glanced up at him. ‘I am unused to talking about myself, Mr Brown. I have grown used to separating myself off from the life I had before I came to the Tandys. It’s as though I took on a new identity when I came to work for them. Does that sound odd?’

‘Absolutely not.’

She took a deep breath and then spoke rather hurriedly. ‘I was born at Kings Lynn rectory. My father was the rector. I was the only daughter of my parents. I was doted on. I had a delightful childhood, full of romps and picnics and friends in the village. And then...’ Her voice lowered, and she spoke in short sentences, as though every word had to be ejected quickly. ‘And then Mama, who had never been strong, grew increasingly unwell and there were no more romps and picnics. I became her nurse when I was about eleven.

‘She died when I was fifteen. Papa was desolate, and he too was gone a little over a year later. There was no money, for Papa had spent everything on doctors and new treatments for Mama. The rectory was taken over by the new rector, and I took up a position first as a governess to a family with young children,’ here she gave a rueful laugh. ‘I think they must have been the most disagreeable children in England. A very unpleasant family. I was more glad than I can say to find my new position as companion to Miss Tandy.’ Her hand on his arm had tightened as she spoke.

He gently squeezed her arm against his. ‘Thank you,’ he said.

‘For what?’

‘For honouring me with your story. It was impertinent of me to unearth such painful memories.’

‘Actually,’ she said, sounding a little surprised, ‘I feel strangely lighter. I have not told my story to anyone in years. But what of you? What is your story?’

He hesitated, wondering how much he should share. He felt a pang of disloyalty at keeping back some of his history when she had been so open about herself, but he could not talk about the rejection of his grandfather, not yet.

‘I was born in France, as you may have guessed. My mother was English, my father French. I too had a pleasant childhood. I too was the only child of my parents. And I too lost my mother to illness when I was nine. My father was likewise left desolate, but he was a strong man, and though he did grow a little distant and spent all his time keeping busy with his interests, he remained an excellent father.’ He fell silent as he recalled his father on the last morning he had ever seen him. He saw the scene again – the door shutting forever on his father’s face, the scramble onto the horse, the frantic escape from the grounds of his beautiful home – past the manor lake shining crimson by the rising sun. He had not allowed himself to think of that day for a long time.

‘Mr Brown,’ said Miss Dymond gently, ‘you are crushing my hand.’

‘My apologies.’ He relaxed his arm. His whole body had tensed.

‘Did you lose your father also?’ Miss Dymond enquired sadly.

‘I did. I was twelve. There was no money for me. No home. I became apprentice to a tailor and his seamstress sister, and there I learned my craft until the tailor died, and I lost my home once again.’

‘How very alike our stories are,’ marvelled Miss Dymond. They had taken their route through the smaller, quieter streets. Now they neared the church of St. Anne, its copper cupola still new enough to be shiny and free from verdigris, just as the bell in the clock tower sounded. A bustle at the gates to the churchyard caused them to stand back and watch as a little party of wedding guests surround a smiling bride and groom. They were not a very fashionable party. Henry noted the groom’s suit was a year or two out of fashion, and the bride’s gown was of cambric, and looked home-made. But they were a happy looking pair.

‘A love match,’ Henry murmured, ushering Miss Dymond aside to avoid a flock of children surging round the newlyweds, cheering and tossing handfuls of petals and rice with indiscriminate aim. He put down the basket and umbrella to put a protective arm about Miss Dymond. One enthusiastic boy clambered up a tree behind the churchyard wall and rained down rice and leaves, and whatever else came to hand.

Miss Dymond laughed and shielded her face against Henry’s shoulder while rice rained down on their heads from the tree above. The church bells drowned out the vicar’s shouting as he bellowed at the boy to get down. The young bride, happening to turn her head as she passed by, saw Henry and Miss Dymond under their barrage, and

stopped to say, 'Sorry, Miss, my little brother is a monkey. Get down, Charlie, or you won't get no wedding cake!'

'It's quite alright, ma'am,' Henry said politely. 'And congratulations, you are a beautiful bride.'

The young bride beamed and pulled out a pink rose from her posy and gave it to Miss Dymond before tripping back to her husband's side.

Charlie clambered down the tree to escape the irate vicar on the other side. His skinny legs dangled above the wall, and Henry steered Miss Dymond back to avoid being landed on by Charlie in his torn stockings. The boy dropped with such force that Miss Dymond cried out, 'Oh, are you hurt!'

Charlie looked up, recovered himself, gave a cheeky grin, and darted away after the wedding party. Henry laughed.

'What a scamp,' said Miss Dymond. A sudden realisation dawned on them as they noticed how very close they were. Henry's arm was still about Miss Dymond's shoulders, and only the little pink rose she held was between them. Henry realised that no one had touched him since he was twelve years old. There had been no physical affection from the Bruneaus. To have another person in the circle of his arms, this young woman who was content to be pressed against him, it was a heady sensation.

For one moment Henry did not hear the church bells above them or the clatter of carriages and pedestrians behind them, he was lost in wonder of Miss Dymond, whose face was transformed from merely pretty and pleasant to radiant as she laughed, free of care. Their eyes met and the scent of the dog rose petals in her hand mingled with her laughter and the warmth of the May sunshine, and somehow all these convergences of the senses made the impulse of bending to drop a kiss on Miss Dymond's upturned mouth perfectly fitting. It was only one gentle kiss, a few moments of pressure, met equally by Miss Dymond, and it surprised them both. She stared at him and, not wanting to hear her say anything dismissive of what had just happened, he said lightly, 'It's tradition where I come from to kiss when the bride passes by.'

Miss Dymond did not pull away. The magic of the moment was upon them both. Then she seemed to recall where she was, and she stepped back, her cheeks flushing. He rescued her from any embarrassment by making a show of shaking rice and leaves from his head until she laughed again. They brushed leaves from each other's shoulders, then he tucked her hand back under his arm, rearranged her umbrella and basket on his other arm. and sauntered on as if nothing monumental had just happened to them under the plane tree of St. Anne's Church.

They passed through Leicester Square. There were only three more streets before they parted.

'Is it really a tradition where you come from to...kiss...when the bride passes by?' Miss Dymond asked hesitantly. 'Or were you teasing me?'

'I would not risk losing the only friend I have in England by teasing her.'

Miss Dymond seemed quietly pleased by this answer. They walked companionably on for the length of another street, their pace a little slower, as though neither of them wished to hurry. 'What made you come to England?' she asked. 'It is not an easy time for emigres. There is still much bad feeling towards the French.'

'I thought I might find some relatives of my mother's. But I was wrong. There is no one.'

They joined the main thoroughfare, where it was too noisy for conversation. Carriages and carts and horses streamed by in a heavy press of traffic; sellers shouted their wares, and pedestrians jostled in the narrow parts of the street.

'Come and have coffee with me,' Henry said, when they reached the place where they would part. She hesitated, looking as though she was wrestling with the decision. 'It's excellent coffee,' he promised. 'Served with the best madeleines in London.'

'How do you know?' she said with a wry smile. 'Have you tried all the madeleines in London?'

'Try one, then tell me if you think anywhere in London could improve on them.'

She glanced up the street in the direction she was bound for, and her smile faded. 'I had best not,' she said, extricating her arm from his and taking her basket. 'It is not quite the thing for ladies to go into coffee-houses, and I am expected somewhere. I mustn't be late.'

Some impulse caused him to say, 'You will not like to keep him waiting. Your friend.'

She did not refute his words. He was not sure if she really heard them; she seemed a little anxious. 'I will see you at dinner, no doubt,' she said, turning eastward. 'Enjoy your afternoon,' she said in parting.

'Miss Dymond!' he called after her.

'Yes?'

'You will be sure to reach home before dark.'

'I will.'

'Do you promise?'

'I promise.'

He tried to call out that she had forgotten her umbrella – it was still on his arm, but the crowd swallowed her up. So she has a lover, he thought. She had not denied that her friend was a *he*. And how

anxious she was to get to him. Then it occurred to him that it was odd that she should be anxious about seeing someone she cared for. She ought to be happy; she ought to be excited to see the man she loved after a full fortnight since their last meeting. And what kind of man was this friend to let a young lady walk all the way home alone?

He stood in the street, being jostled by passers-by. He gave a little shake of the head. It was not his business what Miss Dymond did or who she met, and he took a step in the direction of the coffee-house. But he paused again, causing a watercress seller behind him to run into his back. 'Watch yer step, cove!' the seller yelled into his ear before shouldering past. Henry swung round, deciding that Miss Dymond had known enough sorrow in her young life to be left gullible to some unworthy fool who let her walk home in the dark. At the least he would make sure she had her umbrella in case she was late home again.

Miss Dymond walked quickly, and Henry had to spur himself on to catch up and keep her within sight. Even if she had turned round, she would have had difficulty seeing him amidst the crowd. She walked in a direct line, over the bridge, down Southwark Street, ignoring all beggars and sellers and street entertainers; she did not walk as a young lady out on an afternoon of leisure, but as a woman with a fixed purpose. He called her name intermittently, but she could not hear him. She disappeared into a busy part of a food market, and he almost gave up looking for her when he caught a glimpse of her through a gap in the crowd of shoppers. She was walking northwards, her basket clearly weighed down with goods.

She approached a building of red brick walls with a large gate of wrought iron. One moment she stood at the gate, as though speaking to someone through the bars, the next moment a side gate had opened and she disappeared through it. Henry reached the gate, ready to call her back. Through the bars he could see a stretch of earthen courtyard, beyond that, more walls and what looked like a row of soot-stained houses. But Miss Dymond was not to be seen. 'Excuse me,' he called through the gate to a man in a dirty coat and a squashed hat. 'Is this a private residence?'

The man gave a bark of laughter, showing blackened teeth. 'Tis a right royal private residence,' said the man, with another bark of laughter. 'Guests are at the king's pleasure.' He disappeared, but Henry could still hear him laughing like a wheezy dog.

There was a sign over the gateway; he took a step back to view it, sounding out the syllables, for it was an unfamiliar word. 'Mar-shall-sea.'

There was a grim, heavy atmosphere about the place, and Henry, who was sensitive to atmospheres, shivered despite the May sunshine.

What was a gentle lady such as Miss Dymond doing visiting a place like this? What kind of man was her lover that he should live behind a wrought-iron gate topped with spikes?

He walked away thoughtfully, needing to find a post office to despatch his letter to Mr Tandy. Then he would go to the Strand. But he was determined to watch for Miss Dymond when she returned over the bridge, and to see her safely home.

PETER CANNING WISHED he'd thrown expense to the wind and taken a hackney coach to Mr Lingham's offices. It was only a short walk to Lincoln's Inn Fields from the inn near Charing Cross where he'd put up on arrival that day, but he found negotiating the mazy side roads and hectic main roads of London bewildering. There was so much to assault the senses.

He had not left the quiet green lanes and fields of Eastersham for many years, almost a decade in fact, and now he felt like a regular greenhorn as he picked his way across filthy streets with his scented handkerchief to his nose. How noisy, how dirty, how smelly the metropolis was. A sudden image of himself living in poverty in some city hovel made him quail at the mission he was set upon. If Mr Butternock knew what he was doing, he would be cast out of Eastersham. He could not survive in such chaos as this surging tide of humankind. His nerves were further shaken by his spying a gaunt looking man with bowed shoulders across the street and recognising him as Mr Butternock's valet. What was his name? Coffey. That was it. He was sure it was Coffey. He would recognise that limping gait anywhere. It was possible that his overwrought nerves were playing tricks on him, but he ducked out of sight just to be safe.

He paused for a moment, sheltering in the doorway of a chandlery shop as the passers-by tripped and ambled and marched on. His resolve was being shaken. What was he doing here? He ought to be about his master's business back in Sussex. It was Friday, and on Friday all the silver was polished, and he was not there to check the footmen's work.

On the other side of the street stood a shop with a sign hanging down. *Fleur de Lis*, said the sign, displaying a blue background and a yellow lily. From the smell wafting across the street, it was certainly a coffee-house. Must be run by some royalist Frenchman, Mr Canning surmised. He never drank coffee himself; it gave him palpitations.

He closed his eyes for a moment, taking a deep sniff of his handkerchief, the scent of the rosewater serving to soothe his jarred senses. He was a religious man, but he found it easier to recall his

Creator when dwelling among the clean orderly halls of Eastersham Manor, surrounded by the peaceful ancient oaks in the parklands; it took more faith to feel in harmony with heaven when surrounded by sooty stones and scabious street urchins. He sent up a little prayer for some divine direction through the fading rosewater, then opened his eyes and gasped. A young man was coming out of the coffee shop. He was elegantly dressed in a tailored coat and the new style of tight pantaloons. He carried what looked like an old umbrella in one hand, such an article looking incongruent with the rest of his smart appearance.

The man turned in the doorway of the shop to call back a last greeting to someone, and his speech was French. What had caused Mr Canning to gasp was that the young man looked exactly like the stranger with the French accent who had turned up dripping wet at the door of Eastersham Park. Were his nerves playing another trick on him? But, no, it was undoubtedly the same man who had brought him to London. The posture was the same. The slim, youthful figure, the exact same height. He *knew* it was him. If he could cross the road to him, he would see those brown eyes that had looked so despairing at the news that his grandfather wanted nothing to do with him. That look had haunted Mr Canning day and night for two weeks.

The man raised a hand, called out, '*Adieu!*' and strode away, swinging the umbrella like a walking stick. Mr Canning raised his handkerchief, called out, 'Excuse me, sir!' but a dray cart rumbled slowly past at that moment, bumping over the cobbles and drowning out Mr Canning's voice. When the cart had gone from view, so had the man. Mr Canning hurried on, looking up and down the street, but the man had gone. But it was enough to have glimpsed him. It was a sign. He straightened his shoulders and turned his face to Lincoln's Inn Fields. He would find Mr Lingham and unburden the secret that had been weighing on him unbearably.



LAURA ALWAYS FELT wretched on her way home after seeing Frederick. The atmosphere of that dreadful place clung to her even after she left it, haunting her like a ghost all the way home. It usually took two days for this oppressive feeling to be exorcised by the cheerfulness of the Tandy house and the frippery and nonsense of Miss Tandy's innocent, carefree life which could never coexist with such sights and sounds and feelings as Laura kept carefully hidden away.

'Miss Dymond!' Laura jumped, startled that anyone should speak her name when she was still submerged in her hidden life. It was Mr Brown, his friendly, handsome face smiling at her, his hand waving a greeting from across the street. A suspicion darted through her mind – had he been waiting for her? Surely not. It had been more than four hours since they parted in the Strand. He ran lightly across the road to join her, dodging a speeding curricule as nimbly as any true Londoner.

'Are you returning to Hanover Square?'

'Yes,' she said simply, still feeling tainted and drained by the despair within the walls of the Marshalsea.

'Let me accompany you. I have been walking along the river. I hoped to see you on the way home, for you forgot this.' He lifted her umbrella.

It was such a feeling of comfort to have a friendly smile and a strong arm held out to her. She took it gratefully, banishing all ridiculous thoughts of him spying on her. 'Thank you,' she murmured. They set off, walking briskly down Arundel Street, then taking the quieter side roads.

'Was your visit pleasant, Miss Dymond?'

'Yes.'

'Your friend was well?'

'Y...yes. Tolerably well, I thank you.'

He looked down at her, but she would not meet his eyes. He would see that something was wrong. She roused herself to speak cheerfully. 'And have you had a good afternoon?'

'Very pleasant. I drank far too much coffee and ate too many pastries and quite ruined my appetite for dinner.'

'Was it by chance that you met me on the way home, Mr Brown?'

He hesitated, then said, 'Would it displease you if I said I was anxious that you should not meet the same unpleasantness as the last time you walked home on your afternoon off?'

She looked up at him, trying to read his expression. He gave her

his quiet smile, the one he seemed to reserve for her; the dazzling smile was only for Tiffany. She could not suppress a little sigh at his simple smile of friendship. It was foolish to wish that this pleasant, kind man should feel anything warmer for her. It was not as if she were beautiful and glamorous like Tiffany. It did not help that when she looked at the curve of his mouth, she thought of that kiss. But he had said the kiss was only a tradition.

'It has been two weeks this day, almost this very hour, since we met,' he was saying.

She nodded, recalling that evening. Frederick had been in pain with toothache, and she had run frantically around Southwark searching for an apothecary who would not overcharge her for a bottle of clove essence, for she had only a couple of shillings left. This had caused her to be very late home.

'I shall always be grateful to you, Miss Dymond,' Mr Brown was saying. 'You saved my life.'

'Me? But you saved mine,' she protested.

He shook his head. 'There are more ways to save a life than to hit an assailant over the head. You saved me from a far worse fate that night.'

'What fate was that?'

'Homelessness. Loneliness.'

Again, that quiet, brotherly smile.

'If there is any way I can repay you. If you have any burden of care, if you are in need of a friend, a confidant, I am at your service.'

She examined his expression again, trying to read him. Did he sense the weight of the secret sorrow she bore? Did he know something about her? She was torn between fear that he did and feeling touched that he should offer her such an assurance of friendship. A drunken man reeled towards them on a path of collision; Mr Brown put his arm around her shoulders and drew her to his chest, using his body as a shield to keep her from being jostled by the lurching drunk as he passed by. The effect of this unexpected touch made Laura feel as though she were the drunken one. Her head spun and her senses reeled, for her face was so close to his that she could smell his skin. Perhaps he would kiss her again. Ought she to let him? What was happening to her? It was only a few moments, and then he drew back, pulling her hand back through his arm and walking on. He began talking again, and she thought it was so unfair that he could speak so calmly while she was flailing in a torrent of unsettling emotions.

But his light-hearted stories of the things he had seen and heard that afternoon served a good purpose: they distracted her from thoughts of Frederick. By the time they turned into Hanover Street he

had made her laugh several times with his attempt to mimic a Cockney accent, and his bewilderment over their language, which was not like any English he had ever learnt.

They entered the Tandy house and removed their coats and were met by Tiffany, gliding down the stairs in an exquisitely tailored carriage dress with a new hat pinned at a flirtatious angle on her golden hair.

‘I see someone has had a pleasant afternoon,’ she said, looking between Laura and Mr Brown. ‘Have you spent it together?’

The question was innocently asked, but Laura felt herself blushing and stared at the floor. Suddenly she felt exhausted from the great pendulum of emotions she had passed through in the preceding hours: anxiety, grief, shame, and then the surprising comfort of an unexpected friend. And then, out of nowhere, feelings of something fierce and wonderful and awful all at the same time as the physical proximity of that same friend startled her out of her carefully compartmented life.

Was she in love? That was the thought that had made her blush unaccountably. Tiffany was saying something, and Laura forced herself to look up, only to see that Tiffany was talking to Mr Brown about gloves. Tiffany was holding out her graceful little hands to show Mr Brown her lilac kid gloves, and Mr Brown was telling her she had chosen perfectly, and they shared a smile, and Laura felt as though all the breath had been squeezed out of her.

‘What do you think of my ensemble, Laura?’ Tiffany asked, making a little twirl on the marble tiles of the hallway. ‘Isn’t Mr Brown clever? He designed it, of course.’

‘It’s beautiful,’ said Laura sadly, feeling the contrast between her own plain gown and the miracle of tailoring and curled hair and natural radiance that was Tiffany Tandy.

‘Mr Butternock is taking me driving,’ said Tiffany.

‘Again?’ said Laura. ‘How attentive he is.’

‘Very,’ said Tiffany airily. ‘But I have not yet decided if I like him as well as he likes me. He is not as well dressed as you, Mr Brown, but then, what man is? Is my hair well arranged?’ Tiffany moved to the pier glass in the hall and tucked a ringlet into place. ‘Martha arranged it, but she is not as good as Laura with the curlers.’ Tiffany was asking Mr Brown’s opinion, and he moved to stand behind her so he could view her in the mirror. Laura did not notice that he was examining Miss Tandy with the critical eye of an artist seeking perfection, she only saw that he was standing very close to Tiffany, and that they made a very handsome couple.

Laura murmured something about needing to change out of her walking dress, which was ludicrous, for she only had one day gown,

but Tiffany did not notice, being too engaged in having Mr Brown adjust the angle of her hat to a precise degree.

HENRY WAS SATISFIED with his work. Miss Tandy was ready for her engagement to drive out with her suitor. He had managed to hide the little jolt he always felt when the name of Mr Butternock was spoken. He had not forgotten that piece of newspaper gossip he had read regarding Mr Butternock being the heir of Lord Lansdowne. There surely could be only one Morton Butternock of Sussex, with a rich uncle.

Henry's only alteration to Tiffany's ensemble was to send a maid away with Miss Tandy's favourite painted silk parasol and call for the ivory holland one with the fine silver stripe. 'Only pale coloured parasols for you, Miss Tandy,' he reminded her. 'To cast a soft light onto the face and hair. Only a brunette can bear blue and yellow together.'

'I shall not argue, Mr Brown,' said Tiffany, taking up the recommended parasol. 'As you can see, I am becoming a very good student of yours, am I not?'

'The most becoming student I have ever had,' said Henry, mirroring her mildly flirtatious manner. He looked over to Miss Dymond, to bring her into the conversation and ask for her opinion on Miss Tandy's outfit, but Miss Dymond was disappearing around the curve of the stairs to the first floor.

Tiffany saw him looking up and said, 'It was kind of you to walk Laura home today. Usually, she comes back from her afternoon off looking dreadful and pleading a headache for the rest of the evening, but today she was actually laughing when she came through the door. You are a good influence on us all, Mr Brown.'

'It is my pleasure, I assure you.'

'Do you know where she went?'

'Miss Dymond?'

Tiffany nodded. 'She is always so secretive about where she goes. She won't take the carriage or one of the servants, quite as if she does not want anyone to see her.'

Mr Brown hesitated, hating to lie by omission, but in no way prepared to betray Miss Dymond's private concerns. 'I walked with Miss Dymond as far as the Strand,' he said, 'and then we went our separate ways. I happened to meet her on the same road coming back.'

'I suppose when you asked her where she had been, she only said she had been visiting an old friend?' said Tiffany, testing her parasol by opening it. 'Oh, bothersome thing, now I recall why I do not use this one.'

‘Let me see.’ Mr Brown took the parasol and examined the spokes, moving one of them back into place and straightening another. ‘I wonder,’ he said casually as he fiddled with the parasol, ‘that Miss Dymond’s own wardrobe is not more in keeping with her position.’ He opened and closed the parasol to test it. ‘She goes out very often with yourself and Mrs Tandy, and perhaps could do with a more suitable presentation.’ He handed the parasol back.

‘I quite agree,’ said Tiffany. ‘Mama gave Laura a handsome sum to get herself some gowns made up, and when Laura is pressed about it, she colours up and looks miserable, and says that she has not had time to see about it and will do so directly, and then she never does. Laura is very mysterious sometimes, and not in a good way, but I love her dearly despite her foibles.’

The door knocker sounded. ‘Oh, there is Mr Butternock. He must not find me standing in the hall, it would look as though I was over keen. I shall run up the stairs and descend again slowly. Would you be a dear and take him into the front parlour to wait for me? Give him a drink, for I must not appear without making him wait at least five minutes. Must keep him on his toes.’ She laughed girlishly and made a graceful, if speedy, ascent up the stairs. Once she was out of view, Henry gave the footman the nod to open the door.

It was not Mr Butternock however, it was Ralph. He bounded in, tossing his hat at the footman and calling to Henry to come and look at his purchase.

‘Best linen in England,’ said Ralph proudly. ‘And only four shillings a yard.’

‘Four shillings...’ Henry protested, knowing that excellent linen could be purchased for half that sum, but his voice trailed away as he gaped at the sight of a trio of shop boys staggering blindly up the stairs to the front door, their arms heavy laden with bolts of cloth.

‘*Cieux au-dessus!*’ exclaimed Henry, lapsing into his native tongue in his surprise. ‘How much did you buy?’

‘Thought I might as well buy the lot,’ said Ralph. ‘Seeing as it were going for a song.’

‘It’s unbleached,’ said Henry faintly.

‘I’ll put it in the library,’ said Ralph, not noticing Henry’s dismay. ‘That’s where you do all your drawing work. Be out of the way there. You can say it’s yours if anyone asks.’ Ralph sauntered down the hall, his line of shop boys trotting after him like a row of ducklings. They reappeared some minutes later looking pleased as they compared their half-crown pieces on the way out. The footman held the door for the exodus of chattering boys, and Henry, who was still in the hallway, heard a man’s shrill voice ordering them out of his way. Mr Butternock had arrived.

Mr Butternock had made the effort to look spruce and groomed, but he used an inferior tailor, thought Henry, noting with dissatisfaction the uneven hemline of Mr Butternock's coat. The cravat was not well tied either; it was far too casual, as though Mr Butternock's valet was untrained in the art of cravat tying. While Henry was assessing Mr Butternock's appearance, Mr Butternock was likewise giving Henry a sweeping look, taking in Henry's smart blue coat with a gleam of what might be jealousy, or simply mistrust, but either way it was not a friendly look.

Henry did his duty and showed Mr Butternock into the front parlour, relaying Miss Tandy's message that she would be with him very soon, then offering him a glass of sherry from the decanter on the Adams sideboard.

Ralph's head appeared around the door, but on seeing Mr Butternock, he withdrew again, with a wink at Henry, disappearing before Mr Butternock had noticed him.

Mr Butternock accepted the sherry without thanks, still eyeing Henry uneasily, unsure whether to treat him as a servant beneath his notice or a person on equal footing with the family.

'What exactly are you?' Mr Butternock blurted out after downing his sherry in two mouthfuls.

Henry gave him a cool look. '*What* am I?'

'You know what I mean. What's your position? I thought you some kind of valet, but you seem very free and easy in the house. Are you a poor relation? No, can't be, you've got that accent. French, ain't it?'

'More sherry?'

Mr Butternock held out his glass without a word.

'My position, sir,' said Henry evenly, 'is between myself and Mr and Mrs Tandy.'

'How long have you been in England?'

'Oh, an age,' said Henry vaguely, not wishing to give any facts to this unfriendly creature who was also his supplanter.

'Ever been to Sussex?'

'Sussex?' Henry feigned an air of ignorance. 'Is that near London?'

Mr Butternock relaxed a degree, his eyes losing their suspicious glare.

'Are you from Sussex, Mr Butternock?'

'Yes.'

'You have family there?'

'Yes.' Mr Butternock's eyes narrowed again. 'Why do you ask?'

'One hears things.' Henry could not resist probing for information. 'There is a rumour that you have a vast estate in Sussex. Or you are to inherit one shortly. A beautiful estate, if the rumours are true.'

Mr Butternock's chest swelled, but his look remained wary.

The door opened, and Miss Tandy appeared, looking as fresh as a new rose. 'I hope I have not kept you waiting, Mr Butternock?'

'It would be worth waiting all day for one glimpse of you, Miss Tandy,' said Mr Butternock, turning to make his flourishing bow. His corset creaked with the movement, and Tiffany threw Henry a mischievous smile over her suitor's bent head.

'And what were you gentlemen talking of?' Tiffany enquired, as Mr Butternock unbent himself.

'We were talking of Sussex,' said Henry.

'That is where you come from, is it not?' Tiffany asked her suitor.

'It is indeed,' said Mr Butternock. He drained his sherry glass and held it out to Mr Brown. Henry ignored the gesture, pretending not to see it. He was not going to be treated like a lackey by a man in cheap tailoring.

'Do you have other family there, Mr Butternock?' Tiffany enquired. 'Parents, siblings, cousins?'

'None but my uncle,' was the decided reply as Tiffany led the way from the room. 'All else are dead.'

'Good bye, Mr Brown,' Tiffany called back. Mr Butternock threw back a hostile glance in parting.

Henry watched them leave, feeling a mix of feelings: disappointment that the man who was a second cousin to him should be a shallow coxcomb who clearly had taken Henry in dislike as quickly as Henry had done so to him. The old feeling of displacement rose, but it was such a longstanding feeling in Henry that he barely noticed it. If he had been pressed to describe how he felt, he would say he felt very much an orphan, very much an outsider, and very much a foreigner. He moved to the window overlooking the street in front of the house and watched Mr Butternock handing Tiffany up into the open carriage; a hired carriage, judging by the livery of the tiger who was holding the horse's head. It did seem grossly unfair that a man such as Mr Butternock should have everything that was denied to himself, he mused, as the man in question clambered up into the driver's seat. Henry winced as he saw Mr Butternock catch Tiffany's skirt under his leg. He had better not have torn it.

Miss Tandy rearranged her skirts, laughing away the flash of irritation she had shown at this clumsiness. Mr Butternock had at least one family member, Henry mused. He had a comfortable and substantial home to inherit and preserve for his children after him; he had a good chance of gaining the beautiful Miss Tandy as a wife. Henry caught himself sinking and mentally drew himself back up. He would not wallow in bitterness. That was not his nature. Life had played him a hand he would not have wished for, but he would work hard and get on, and perhaps in time he would have a home and

family of his own. Perhaps.

Miss Tandy opened her parasol against the afternoon sun at the same time as Mr Butternock leaned towards her to say something. One of the spokes caught him in the nose and Henry smiled ruefully. The carriage moved away.

'Mrs Tandy wishes to see you in her boudoir, sir,' announced Symes, the footman. Henry was glad of the interruption and resumed his usual pleasant countenance ready for his benefactress.

MRS TANDY WAS RECLINING on her couch in *dishabille*, wearing her favourite flowing dressing gown of red flannel embroidered with large yellow feathers. 'Nothing so comfortable as flannel,' she said defensively as Henry eyed her gown. 'I suppose you are going to give me a scold and tell me I should have a satin or silk dressing gown, but I tell you satin is as cold as a duke's sneer.'

'I am of the opinion, ma'am,' said Henry, taking an adjacent chair, as directed, 'that what a lady wears in her boudoir is entirely about comfort. So long as she does not entertain dukes there, that is.'

'La, the more I see of dukes and duchesses and lords and ladies, the more I thank my stars I am not one to stand on ceremony in satin, but can appreciate the simple comforts of life.'

'Yet you wish to continue pursuing the favour of society?' Henry observed.

'Only for Tiffany's sake. Mr Tandy does so want to see her become a Lady. Money will only take you so far, Mr Brown. You can have ever so much of it, more than most, but if you don't have the right blood or connections you can only go so far. Mr Tandy is an ambitious man. He wants his grandchildren to be accepted anywhere. He started out as a factory boy, did I tell you that? Working sixteen hours a day till he were fit for nothing. But he don't employ children in his factories, Mr Brown, and he don't make anyone work sixteen hours a day. Some folks call him a fool for his notions, some call him a revolutionary, but he don't go chopping off heads and he don't look like a fool now, do he? Not now he's one of the richest men in the north.'

'A remarkable man,' acknowledged Henry.

'Mr Tandy has a notion that if his grandchildren can get high up in life, they can get into parliament and all and make a difference in work laws and so on. And if that's revolutionary, then so be it.'

'Very commendable,' agreed Henry. 'What did you wish to see me about, ma'am?'

'Ah, here's the tea. Put it here, Lottie, there's a good girl. Go on and pour it for me, you can do it. I like it good and strong. Lottie is a new girl, Mr Brown, not used to teapots. How do you take your tea?'

Henry desisted from saying he disliked tea immensely and would

prefer coffee. Instead, he said it would be perfect just as it came.

'Bread and butter, Mr Brown? Have one of these little biscuits. What does Cook call them, Lottie?'

'Ratty-fee cakes, mum.'

'And are they good, Lottie? I can see by them crumbs on your bib that you've sampled them on the way up.'

Lottie started back with a whimper of dismay.

'Don't get in a fetch, child, but you've no need to be pilfering. Cook will feed you handsomely. You've been fed handsomely since you got here, haven't you?'

'Y-yes, mum,' stammered Lottie.

'Off you go. I'll ring when it's time to take the tray away. Don't slam the door on your way out.'

Lottie bobbed a curtsey and fled.

'Workhouse girl,' said Mrs Tandy when Lottie had slammed shut the door. 'They always come thin as sticks and can't quite believe the victuals ain't going to disappear like some fairy food, so they hoard it under their mattresses and pilfer the pantry, but they settle down in time. I like my servants plump and happy, Mr Brown.' She eyed him over her teacup as he nibbled at a dainty ratafia cake out of politeness. 'You could do with feeding up, Mr Brown, I don't mind telling you.'

'You wished to see me about something, ma'am?' Henry reminded her politely.

'La, yes. It's about all these duchesses and ladies. They're wild to meet you, Mr Brown. I've done as you said and kept you all mysterious and *exclusive*, but how they do press me. I got to thinking that perhaps it could be used to our advantage. If you were to meet some of the ladies, just the high-flying ones, it would be a good way to get them here for a party, for I've never been able to hold a party, not having the connections for it, and I am very fond of parties.'

'An exclusive party where I am the chief attraction?' said Henry, not sure if he should be amused or offended. 'Perhaps I should be served up on a silver platter like the famous Lady Wilde?' he suggested wryly.

'La, no!' protested Mrs Tandy. 'For she was wearing nothing but aspic jelly. My guests will want to see your clothes.'

Henry knew Mrs Tandy well enough by now to realise that if her heart was set upon a party, then she would have a party. 'Mrs Tandy, if you will heed me in one thing, then I shall be glad to assist you.'

'I will do just as you say, Mr Brown, for you are our Social Director, and that is how I shall introduce you. Do you like the title?'

'Very good, ma'am. But my one insistence is that you allow me to approve your guest list. And most important of all,' he paused for

effect, raising his forefinger and schooling his face into a look of authority.'

'Yes?' said Mrs Tandy, looking suitably impressed.

'Most important of all, you must *not* add one single person, *not one*, to the list I approve.'

'Very good, Mr Brown.'

'Mrs Tandy, *I mean it*. I know your generous nature too well by now. You will invite everyone you speak to, and that will not do. You will invite the dresser who arranges your hair, you will invite the maid who delivers the milk, you will invite perfect strangers who happen to smile at you as they pass by in the park. You will invite every one of your neighbours and all their acquaintances with them, but *it will not do*. It must be exclusive, or you will only insult your *high-flying* guests, as you call them, and all your hopes for Miss Tandy shall be dashed to pieces, do you understand?' He had laid it on as thick as pâté, but it was necessary, or the whole thing would turn into a circus.

'I shall do just as you say, Mr Brown.' Mrs Tandy's eyes glowed with pleasure. 'We shall have the most fabulous dinner, the best of everything, turtle soup and lobster, and a little orchestra, and we'll open the saloon and dining room together for dancing, and perhaps I can engage one of those fashionable singers, perhaps Frau Jeder, I think she sounds droll, but the high-fliers seem to think she's wonderful, and—'

'Absolutely no turtles, no orchestra, no dancing and *no Frau Jeder*,' said Henry firmly.

Mrs Tandy gaped at him. 'Then what?'

'Tea, Mrs Tandy. You will invite the highest ladies in society to take tea with you in the evening.'

'No dinner?'

'Absolutely not.'

'No music?'

'Completely unnecessary.'

Mrs Tandy shook her head in amazement. 'La, Mr Brown! I do believe you have lost your senses on this matter, even if you have been so right about everything else! You have made us fashionable, but now you want to make us look like penny-pinching dowdies who can't put on a good show. We'll be the laughing-stock. We'll be ruined!'

'Mrs Tandy, you must trust my judgement. I have spent many hours with ladies of the highest echelons of society, and while there is a place for opulence and expense and putting on *a good show*, there is also a time for utter simplicity. By inviting the highest ladies in the land to merely take tea with you in the evening, you are showing that

you have no need to impress them. You are declaring that they must accept you on your terms. And once they have been seen to wait upon you, they will have to justify their actions to all the world, and so they will laud you. If you throw a lavish, showy party, Mrs Tandy, they will look down their noses at you and call you *vulgar*. If you give them a modest cup of tea, they will call you an *Original*, which is the highest compliment a lady in your class can aspire to.'

Mrs Tandy looked doubtfully at him. She was silent for a full minute as she sipped her tea. Finally, she took up a biscuit, examined it closely and said, 'Can I serve cakes, Mr Brown?'

'You may serve an elegant selection of the lightest confections your cook can provide.'

'And when you say elegant, Mr Brown, I have a notion of what you mean. You mean no big cream puffs, no gateaux, no custards. You mean little bitsy mouthfuls that wouldn't satisfy a sparrow, don't you, Mr Brown?'

'I do. But the tea shall be of the highest quality, and the china shall be exquisite, and the servants shall be both numerous and discreet, and I shall be there to charm your guests and answer all their questions on fashion, and they will leave thinking you are the most marvellous lady, not one of those showy Cits trying to impress them, but as refined and regal as any duchess.'

'Will they?' said Mrs Tandy, her good humour returning. 'Will they really?'

'And Miss Tandy shall make an appearance, dressed to perfection, and they shall be wild to send their sons and grandsons and nephews round to pay court to her.' Henry promised.

'Will they really?' Mrs Tandy celebrated this good news with another biscuit, dipping it into her cup absentmindedly, then sucking it. 'And when you say *dressed to perfection*, I know what that means, Mr Brown. You mean she shall look mortal plain to me, but to everyone else she will be *elegant*.'

'Exactly so, Mrs Tandy. You are becoming an excellent student.'

They raised their teacups in a salute to elegance.



MORTON BUTTERNOCK STARED unblinking at his sitting room wall, a glass of wine in his hand. His manservant, Cyril Coffey, knew that look. His master was thinking. And when his master was thinking it usually meant something unpleasant was going to happen to someone. Cyril shifted his weight from one leg to the other. His left leg was half an inch shorter than his right, and it was hard on his back to be kept standing for long periods. He dared to speak. 'Will that be all, sir?'

His voice snapped his master out of his reverie. Cyril braced himself for a tongue-lashing, but his master said thoughtfully, 'You're quite certain it was Canning you saw?'

'If it weren't, it were his double, sir.'

Mr Butternock scowled. 'Tell me again about this Frenchman, Canning tried to follow.'

'He were a young feller.'

'That's no help,' barked Mr Butternock. 'There must be something about him to mark him out. A young fellow could be any one of the emigres crawling about London.'

'He were dressed to a pin. Looked like a real gent. Not like the emigres. They're mostly shabby. I been all over town where the Frenchies hang out, and none are so smart as this feller was. He looked very like the new valet at the Tandy house.'

'What?' Mr Butternock almost dropped his glass. 'Are you certain?'

Cyril shrugged. 'Not for certain. Didn't see his face. And I ain't been paying attention to the feller. You wanted me to watch out for who calls on Miss Tandy, not watch the servants.'

'It's too much of a coincidence,' murmured Mr Butternock, staring into his glass intently, as though he were reading tea leaves. He looked back at Cyril. 'You didn't hear this smartly dressed fellow give his name?'

'He talked in French. Him and the coffee-house owner and one or two of the customers, all gabbering away.'

'Find out what the name of this man is.'

'You said to watch Miss Tandy's house. See if that Partington feller is callin' on her.'

'Go to that coffee-house first and *then* go and watch the Tandy house,' snapped his master. 'Partington won't call before two. No one calls before two. And watch for the valet fellow. Keep a close eye on him. It surely can't be *him*,' he muttered. 'Too much of a coincidence, surely.'

Cyril mumbled his assent. 'Will that be all, sir?' he added, wincing as his back ached.

'No. That's not all. I want you to find out where one would go if they needed a job doing discreetly.'

'What kind of job, sir?'

His master scowled again. 'The kind that is kept quiet. Outside of the law.'

'You want a crook, sir?'

'Perhaps. It might come to it. Ask around in the gin shops. You won't look out of place there.'

'I'll need some blunt. Can't go into gin shops and not buy nothing.'

His master growled but fished out some coins from the money pouch tucked inside his coat pocket. He tossed them on the side table. Cyril brightened and scooped them up. Traipsing round the streets and watching the Tandy house wouldn't be quite so tedious with a few shots of gin and hot inside him.

'Don't come back without some information,' warned his master. 'I want to know who that Frenchman is that Canning was so interested in, and I want to know where to go if I need a job doing. And I want to know if Miss Tandy has any other suitors.'

THE INVITATIONS TO drink tea went out the next day for the following Tuesday. Henry counselled that Tuesday was a good evening as it would not interfere with Almack's on Wednesday, nor Lady Moira's soirée next Thursday, the opera ball on Friday, the Thames regatta on Saturday, nor the card party at Lady Bellingham's on Sunday, not that Mrs Tandy would dream of going to a card party on a Sunday. That was a little too fast and fashionable, even for her.

Meanwhile, Henry was kept busy with Ralph, who was spending his days trawling round the tailors and high-class menswear shops in London, trying to find buyers for his pre-tied cravats. Henry had a hard job keeping track of him, that he might report all his movements to Mr Tandy.

The past couple of days, however, Ralph had seemed to abandon his business scheme; he seemed distracted, and not altogether happy. He kept up a cheery front around his mother but was restless and moody when Henry saw him alone, and bemoaned his failed business venture, saying that no-one was interested in buying his cravats. All the high-class shop managers laughed at him and said it was a vulgar idea. He had scores of the wretched things, and no one wanted even one. Ralph's gloom deepened, but he kept out of trouble. But on the night of Mrs Tandy's High-Flier Tea Party, as the event was now

called, Henry was unable to follow Ralph out, being retained as Mrs Tandy's star attraction for the evening ahead.

The party was accounted a great success. Mrs Tandy was flushed with triumph as the evening ended. 'La!' she cried to Henry when the last guest had left the house. 'How they doted on you!'

'You do have a way with the ladies,' Tiffany said. 'I watched their faces as they each had their little chat with you – they were *besotted*. Whatever did you say to Lady Partington to make her smile? Can you believe it, Mama? Mr Brown actually made her *smile*.'

'I merely made a few compliments,' said Henry.

'You buttered her up,' said Mrs Tandy gleefully.

Henry did not understand that expression. Miss Dymond saw his look of confusion. 'Buttering someone up,' she explained, 'means to flatter someone, or put them in a favourable mind towards you.'

'That was the point of the evening, was it not?' replied Henry.

'I suppose they all wanted to know your recommendations on dress?' said Tiffany.

'They did. And I gave each of them some advice.'

'Do tell,' urged Tiffany, but Henry shook his head.

'My consultations, however casual, are always private.'

Tiffany pouted charmingly. 'I hope you won't let any of them steal you from us? I suppose some of them tried to bribe you away?'

Henry did not repeat some of the offers he'd had. He only said, 'I informed any who enquired that I am contracted to this house until the end of the season and should not think of ever breaking a contract.'

'Oh, I'm so glad,' said Miss Dymond, and then blushed as though she had not meant to say what she was thinking out loud. 'I mean to say...' she added hastily, 'that I am so glad you would not break faith with the family.'

'After all the kindness they have shown me?' said Henry. 'Certainly not.'

'Oh, goody!' said Tiffany, clapping her hands. 'I was worried you might be lured away from us, but now you will be more exclusive than ever! They will all have to wait upon us and can never cut us in public, for then they will not be able to get any fashion advice from you. Do you know, Lady Partington actually asked me to open up her ball next week with her son.'

'I thought you disliked Mr Crispin Partington,' said Laura.

'I never said I *disliked* him,' said Tiffany. 'I only said it was a pity the family had no money, but he is to be an earl one day. And he does not seem to take after his father in being a gamester.'

'That may only be because he has no money with which to go to the gaming tables,' Laura reminded her gently.

Tiffany did not contradict this, but only observed that Crispin Partington was far more pleasant than Morton Butternock.

‘I quite agree,’ said Mrs Tandy. ‘I don’t care for young men who won’t look you in the eye. He always looks at my forehead when he speaks to me. Makes me feel as though I must have a smudge or a spot there. Quite disconcerting.’

‘But he will be a baron one day,’ said Tiffany. ‘And very soon, I gather, for his uncle is said to be on his deathbed.’

Henry’s thoughts had been drifting during this little comparison of Tiffany’s suitors, but his attention snapped back at these words. ‘He is dying? Did Mr Butternock say so?’

‘Yes,’ said Tiffany simply, and resumed her observations of the merits and disadvantages of Mr Butternock and The Honourable Mr Partington. Mrs Tandy was of the opinion that even if Crispin Partington never sat at a gaming table, he would have to support his sister for the rest of her life, for who would marry such a Friday-faced girl without a dowry? Tiffany argued that she could give the girl a dowry if she became her sister-in-law. Someone would marry her eventually, and Crispin Partington was a very good dancer, not like Mr Butternock, who danced like a bear.

‘Are you well, Mr Brown?’ Laura said, leaning forward to speak quietly to him. ‘You look as though something has grieved you?’

Henry had been lost in the thought of his grandfather dying. For a moment, he had been back in his grandfather’s house, waiting in the room he had been ushered into. A room with no fire to warm himself at as he stood dripping wet and cold. He remembered the butler returning to him with a grave look on his face. He recalled the butler’s formal, dispassionate voice as he informed him that he could not be admitted to his grandfather’s presence. He was not recognised as a relation. He was not welcome in that house. If he was who he claimed to be, it made no difference, for he was disowned and disinherited, and had no right to use the name of Lansdowne or make any claim upon it. As Henry had left the house, he thought he had heard the butler say quietly that he was sorry, and then slip a piece of paper into Henry’s pocket, but the rain hammering down had drowned out the quiet words. Henry had remembered the paper much later while on his way to London, and had pulled it out to read, but the rain had soaked it and all the pencilled words had turned to illegible smudges.

‘Mr Brown?’

Henry blinked, returning to Mrs Tandy’s warm drawing room and meeting Miss Dymond’s concerned look. ‘I was reminded of something disagreeable,’ he admitted, ‘but it has passed.’ He stood up. ‘Excuse me, ladies. If I cannot be of any assistance to you this evening, I shall bid you good night, for I have some designs to work on for an hour or

two.'

'Good night, Mr Brown,' said Mrs Tandy cheerfully, 'and thank you again for your wonder-working powers. And when this season is finished, you must not go running off to work for the likes of Lady Petty-Blount, but you should speak to Mr Tandy about setting up a shop, and he will supply your cloth and I dare say he will have you running shops in every city in England, for that is exactly the kind of thing Mr Tandy does when he sets his mind on a venture, and you shall be as rich as Golden Ball in no time, and that will be better than having to toady to the likes of Lady Partington and Lady Fudgely, will it not?'

Henry agreed politely that it would be most agreeable and left the room. The mention of Mr Tandy reminded him that he was under orders to keep a close eye on Mr Tandy's son, who was now absent from the house. But Ralph had not shown any alarming signs of sinking into the lowlife of London of late. Probably the lad had gone to watch some comedy at the theatre, which was his favourite way to spend an evening. Nevertheless, Henry did seek out Symes in the servants' hall to enquire if Master Tandy had called for the carriage that evening.

Symes replied that Master Tandy had not called for the carriage, but when asked if he would be needing it, had said he would take a hack instead.

It was not unusual for Ralph to take a hack, for he frequently complained that his mother's landaulette was only fit for old ladies. His mother ought to get a smart barouche or a sporty phaeton instead.

'Did Master Tandy mention which theatre he was going to?' Henry enquired.

'Master Tandy didn't say nothin' of where he was going,' said Symes.

'But he was in evening clothes? He was dressed for the theatre?'

'I didn't see what was under his cloak, but Master Tandy never wore that old hat what smells of sour milk to the theatre before,' said Symes pointedly.

'Sour milk?'

'Smells sour,' asserted Symes, wrinkling his nose.

'Not...' Henry felt a pang of dismay. 'Not the old tricorne?'

Symes nodded gravely.

Henry groaned. 'Mr Symes, if a young man, such as Master Tandy, were not able to play at The Bear Pit, where else might such a man go should he have a mind to indulge in a little gambling?'

Symes made a great show of thinking hard, while rubbing his left palm to remind Henry that an empty hand made for an empty mind. Henry rummaged in his waistcoat pocket for a coin.

‘Such a man might be found in the Three Crows in St Giles,’ said Symes, eyeing the shilling in Henry’s hand with a disdainful glance. Henry fished for another shilling. ‘My best guess, however, would be the Crook and Fleece behind Neal Street.’

Mr Brown hurried to change into more suitable clothes for trudging round inns and gaming dens, and Symes pocketed his shillings.

IT WAS true that Symes had an uncanny way of knowing everything, Henry admitted to himself, for he did not even have to enter the shady doors of the Crook and Fleece to find Ralph, for as he neared the inn, he met a bulky figure shuffling along in a battered old tricorne.

‘Master Tandy?’ It was the hat that gave Ralph away. He would not have recognised this dejected person as young Ralph Tandy without it. A row of brazier lights on the wall behind Ralph picked out his silhouette.

Ralph looked up, his face distorted by the flickering shadows.

‘What the deuce are you doing here?’ he slurred.

‘Just out for a stroll, Master Tandy. Shall we walk home?’

‘Gerroff,’ growled Ralph, as Henry tried to steer him out of the way of a pile of horse dung at the edge of the street. ‘Not going nowhere wiv you, you niffy-naffy cabbage head.’

Henry ignored these juvenile insults and tried again to steer Ralph out of the road. Ralph did his windmill impression, his arms waving wildly, and Henry darted out of the way to keep from being hit. He waited until Ralph had exhausted himself and finished bellowing his stream of unintelligible oaths. When the tantrum was over, Henry quietly took Ralph’s arm to lead him home like a child. After Ralph had emptied the contents of his stomach near a horse trough outside St. Anne’s and splashed his face from the pump, he was better able to talk without a slurred stream of nonsense.

‘I’m ruined,’ he moaned.

‘How can you be ruined?’ said Henry. ‘I thought you had no money to play with in the first place?’

‘Borrowed it.’

‘From who?’

‘Lender in Dudley Street.’

‘Not one of those disreputable lenders?’

Ralph groaned.

‘How much did you borrow?’

‘Five hundred.’

‘And how much did you lose?’

A pause. Another groan. ‘Eight.’

‘Eight hundred? *Pitié moi!*’ Henry could not keep the shock from

his voice. He stood stock still, absorbing this calamitous news. Eight hundred was a fortune, and no doubt it did not include all the interest a profiteering lender would demand.

‘Pa will pack me off to the army for sure.’ Ralph leaned his head against Henry’s shoulder. ‘That’s if he don’t let me get carted off to the Marshalsea just to teach me a lesson.’ Ralph swayed unsteadily. ‘Not sure which is worse, army or jail.’

‘The Marshalsea is a prison?’ said Henry slowly. Ralph swayed again as though he was going to collapse at any moment. ‘Let me get that carriage,’ Henry said, seeing a hackney draw up on the other side of the street. ‘You’re not fit to walk.’

All the way back to Hanover Square, while Ralph groaned and moaned, Henry thought miserably that it would not just be Ralph who would be sent packing by Mr Tandy, it would also be himself. All Mrs Tandy’s optimistic plans for Henry being set up in a successful business of his own were now dashed. He was on the brink of finding himself homeless and friendless once again now that he had failed to keep Ralph out of gambling trouble. The old curse had followed him across the channel. He could not escape it.



'LISTEN TO THIS, MAMA,' said Tiffany eagerly. Tiffany shook the newspaper so that it crackled.

'No more fashion, my pet,' said Mrs Tandy, leaning back on her favourite boudoir couch, her voluminous flowery dressing gown making her look like a camellia bush. She reached for a jam puff from the cake stand on the table at hand. 'My poor head cannot take any more descriptions of who wore how many ruffles on their hem and what shade of colour their ribbons are and where their lace came from.'

'It's about last night's ball, and it mentions you, Mama.'

'Me? Well, read on, my lamb.'

Tiffany bowed her fair head over the society column and read in her musical voice. ' "Lady Fullington's charitable ball at her mansion in Mayfair was a resounding success. Only the wealthiest members of the *ton* graced her dining table and ballroom, for the cost of a ticket was no less than fifty guineas a head, with all proceeds going to the Foundling Hospital at Coram Fields." '

'Poor little urchins,' Mrs Tandy interjected.

' "Also present was the newest member of Society, a Mrs Tandy, reputedly from the town of Leeds, whose easy manners and questionable accent are more than made up for by her stylish appearance and her beautiful daughter." '

'Questionable accent?' said Mrs Tandy. 'Are they being rude?'

'Newspaper writers are often rude,' said Laura, looking up from the handkerchief she was hemming.

'Listen,' urged Tiffany, 'there's more.'

' "The philanthropic Mrs Tandy was heard to exclaim that if every rich lady in London were to take a foundling into their family and raise it as their own, there would be no need for a foundling hospital at all. Such altruism is to be commended in part, but the general opinion is that such impractical ideas belong in church and not in ballrooms." '

'Why not?' Mrs Tandy demanded. 'La! Don't make a whistle of wind or jot of difference to the poor urchins where it's said. What's impractical about raising children that don't have no one to raise them?'

Tiffany fell silent.

'Is that all that muddle-headed writer has got to say?' Mrs Tandy asked. She licked a dot of jam from her thumb.

‘All that is worth reading,’ said Tiffany, about to turn the page.

‘Theodosia Tandy, you finish reading it. If he’s going to blether on about me, he can do it to my face.’

‘Don’t call me Theodosia,’ murmured Tiffany. ‘You know I hate it. Makes me sound like a nun.’

‘I’ve a mind to write a letter back to him and put him straight,’ continued Mrs Tandy.

Tiffany exchanged a glance of alarm with Laura, but Laura shook her head gently. Mrs Tandy was not one for letters; she was a talker not a writer.

‘Go on, read to the end.’ Mrs Tandy shook out the folds of her dressing gown to clear it of pastry crumbs.

‘It says...’ began Tiffany reluctantly, ‘ “After last night’s outspoken and ill-timed expressions of munificence, Mrs Tandy has succeeded in sealing her dubious honour of being known as a True Eccentric. Society shall now be divided into those who court her as an entertaining newcomer, and those who condemn her as an outspoken upstart. But neither faction would deny that she has a delightfully decorative daughter and a charming and lively son.” ’

Tiffany paused after this paragraph. ‘Delightfully decorative,’ she mused. ‘Is he being rude?’ She looked at Laura.

‘I think he is being complimentary, but in a condescending way,’ said Laura.

Tiffany digested this, then turned back to the article. ‘Oh, he talks about Mr Brown next.’

‘What does he have to say about him?’ Laura asked, straightening up. ‘Nothing rude, I hope.’

‘He calls him, “a celebrated dresser and personal designer, an exclusive young man, thought to be of French origin, despite the very English name of Mr Brown. Even the much-fêted Beau Brummel, that leader of fashion, is known to be an admirer of his work, and now that Society at large has seen the young man for themselves they have dubbed him *Beau Brown* and declared him a worthy rival to our English fashion leader.” ’ Tiffany put the paper down. ‘There, that is the whole of it.’

‘Beau Brown,’ said Mrs Tandy. ‘La, that sounds dashing.’

‘It is odd that Mr Brown should have such a very English name,’ said Tiffany. ‘I wonder how that has come to be.’

‘Perhaps he has taken his mother’s maiden name,’ suggested Laura. ‘She was English.’

‘I shall call him Beau Brown from now on,’ decided Tiffany, dimpling with pleasure. ‘I think it suits him very well.’

Mrs Tandy reached for another jam puff. Laura finished one edge of her handkerchief and held it out to judge if her seam was straight.

She sighed, seeing that it was not. Tiffany turned the page of the paper to the advertisement page. 'Listen to this,' she said. 'It's most interesting.'

'I hope it's no more nonsense about us,' said Mrs Tandy.

'No, it's an advertisement, but rather an unusual one. "*Missing Heir*. A Young man of medium height, slim build, brown hair and eyes, of the name of Vicomte de Courtenay. Last seen a week ago in London. Any information pertaining to knowledge or sighting of him to be forwarded to Mr Lingham at 42 Lincoln's Inn Fields. Sizeable reward offered."

'Missing heir,' said Mrs Tandy. 'And a vicomte. Sounds French. We should ask Mr Brown if he's met any French vicomtes about town. He'd be bound to notice one.'

'Wouldn't it be romantic to meet a handsome vicomte who was the secret heir to a fortune?' said Tiffany, folding the paper and tossing it down. 'Mama, you've eaten all the puffs.'

'Sorry, my pet, but that newspaper writer irritated me no end. Ring the bell and ask for some more.'

'I don't have time, I must dress.' Tiffany stood up. 'Miss Partington is calling for me at two. We are to go to an exhibition of something or other at somewhere or other. Some collection of Greek pottery, or was it Roman statues?'

'Is young Mr Partington going?' Mrs Tandy enquired.

'Yes. He is to drive us. I shall be back by four, for Mr Butternock is to take me driving as usual at five.'

There was a heavy knock at the boudoir door which made all three ladies jump. Lottie, the newest maid appeared.

'Yes, Lottie?' said Mrs Tandy.

'Note just come for Miss Tandy,' said Lottie with a gruff bob of a curtsy. She thrust the note at Tiffany.

'Thank you, Lottie,' said Mrs Tandy. 'You can take the tea tray away with you.'

Lottie looked at the empty cake plate with obvious disappointment.

'And remember, Lottie,' said Mrs Tandy, 'you only need to *tap* at the doors, not hammer on them. No one in this house is deaf.'

'Yes, mum. Sorry, mum.' Lottie blushed.

'And next time a note or letter comes, put it on a salver and *present* it.'

'Yes, mum, sorry, mum.' Lottie's head drooped.

'And Lottie...?'

'Yes, mum?' Lottie looked ready to cry.

'Your curtsies are coming along *beautifully*.'

Lottie beamed like sunshine from behind a rain cloud. 'Thank you,

mum.' She exited the room with much rattling of the tea tray, kicking the door shut behind her with a crash that made the ladies jump again.

'Anything important, love?' Mrs Tandy asked.

'Only Mr Butternock saying he cannot take me driving this afternoon. He must go to Sussex on urgent business.'

'Perhaps it's his uncle,' said Mrs Tandy. 'Perhaps he's popped off, and your Mr Buttercrook shall come back Lord What's-His-Name and make you his lady.'

'He's not *my* Mr Butternock,' said Tiffany. 'Laura, dear, come and help me choose what to wear. What does one wear to an exhibition of Italian statues?'

'I thought you said Greek?' Laura willingly put away her sewing and followed.

MORTON BUTTERNOCK SEETHED ALL the way to Eastersham. Every few minutes he looked again at that treacherous newspaper advertisement offering a reward for news of Vicomte de Courtenay and ground his teeth.

He could have throttled that vexatious lawyer, but instead he'd had to maintain an air of indifference in order to wheedle out of him who had reported seeing the so-called heir in London.

'*I hate lawyers,*' he growled for the umpteenth time that day. The carriage rocked and swayed as it hurtled along with Morton Butternock fulminating within. The wretched lawyer wouldn't tell him anything, not a word of the matter, even dared to warn him not to interfere, or speak to his uncle about it, even dared say that he, Morton, would not find himself welcome at Eastersham at this time!

But there was only one person who had seen this pretender of an heir, and that was that twit of a butler at Eastersham. It must have been the butler his valet had seen that day in the street, after all.

Morton thought he had done well not to let the lawyer know how he really felt about this supposed long-lost heir turning up. And how he really felt was *murderous*. He was not going to let some foreign upstart and wreck everything. It was his *right* to inherit his uncle's title and money. Where had this brat of a grandson been all his life? It was himself, Morton, who had toadied to the old man for years, forced to pay dreary visits to him and humour the old humbug. To think of some outsider sweeping all from him at the last minute, all his plans and dreams gone in a trice, *unthinkable!* He was going to be Lord Lansdowne, with his beautiful estate and his beautiful wife. He had set his heart on exalting Miss Tandy into Lady Theodosia Lansdowne. The

mother was as vulgar as a dairymaid, but he would cut her directly he was married. He would never call his wife *Tiffany*, such a childish name. She was to be his chief *objet d'art*. His brightest possession. She would add glamour to his house parties, where all the snooty lords and ladies of the ton would be fawning over him when he was the richest man in the county.

These alternating thoughts of glory and grim fury lurched through his mind all the way to Sussex.

On reaching Eastersham, he leapt from the carriage, charging to the door and hammering with the knocker. It seemed an age until the door latch on the other side was lifted and the heavy oak door opened.

'Hello, Canning,' Morton said venomously. 'Surprised to see me?' For one moment he thought the butler was going to slam the door in his face, but he would not give him time for that. He shoved his way past him into the hall. Canning turned toward him, his face visibly paling.

'Well, Canning, you Judas, you snake, what have you to say for yourself?'

Canning looked over Morton's head and said in a shaky voice. 'I'm sure I don't understand you, sir.'

'Oh, I think you understand me *perfectly*,' hissed Morton, stalking nearer. He raised up the crumpled torn-out advertisement and shook it in the butler's face. 'You were the only one to see that false heir. That pretender, that usurper. Only *you* could have told my uncle's lawyer that such a person existed, and moreover, Canning, you can't deny it, for you were *seen* slinking about in London. I thought it couldn't be true, thought it must be someone like you, but when I saw this advert this morning, I *knew* it was your doing.'

Mr Canning stood as inert as a suit of armour, still looking over Morton's head in that stony manner.

'Where did you see him?' Morton demanded. 'The advert said the pretender was seen a week ago in London. *Where* did you see him?'

Mr Canning maintained his irksome silence. Morton could have struck his pompous face but didn't quite dare to go that far while his uncle still lived.

'You'll pay for this,' Morton promised. 'I warned you not to speak of it. Has my uncle been told?'

Canning still did not reply. Morton grunted in disgust and turned away. Let the fool keep mute if he wanted. His days at Eastersham were numbered.

He made for the stairs, taking them two at a time in his haste. He had to find out if his uncle knew anything. He could smell that vile sickroom odour of lye soap and camphor as he neared Lord

Lansdowne's chamber. One of his uncle's footmen was lounging on a chair by the door, with his eyes closed. Morton reached for the handle, but the footman's eyes flew open and he leapt up, blocking the way.

'No one's allowed in,' he said firmly

'Move aside, man,' snapped Morton. 'Remember your place.'

'No one's allowed in,' repeated the footman. 'Not anyone, save the doctor or the lawyer.'

'Says who?'

'Master.'

'I am not just *anyone*, I am his nephew, now out of my way, you bird-wit, or I'll kick you down the stairs!' This threat was made ineffective by the footman being brawny and over six feet tall. Morton's eyes only reached as high as his adversary's neck. He glared up at him.

'No one's allowed in. Master's orders.'

Morton felt his heartburn rising.

The bedroom door creaked open a little.

'Who is it?' hissed Mrs Armstrong, Lord Lansdowne's doughty nurse. 'Master heard a racket, wants to know what – oh, it's *you*,' she said, seeing Morton standing in the shadowy hall. 'Get rid of him,' she said to the footman, and moved to close the door again.

'Let me in,' demanded Morton, darting for the door, but the footman blocked him.

'You got to go,' said the footman. And he took hold of Morton's arm and propelled him down the stairs.

'How dare you!' bellowed Morton, struggling to wrench his arm free from the footman's grip. He clung to the bannisters on the way down but was plucked up and half-carried down the stairs, across the hallway. He saw the butler open the door and made one last struggle. 'You'll regret this!' he shouted as he was ejected through the front door. 'I'll see you both turned out the minute I'm lord here!'

'You ain't going to be lord here,' said the footman. 'Is he, Mr Canning? Not now the master's had word of his *real* heir.' And the door was slammed in Morton's face.

IF MORTON BUTTERNOCK had been seething like a bubbling volcano on the way down to Eastersham, he had well and truly erupted on the way back to London. They would all pay dearly for this humiliation. *No one* was going to get away with this!

On reaching his lodgings in Arlington Street that evening, he wasted no time, but shouted at Coffey to help him dress. While he was changing, he interrogated Coffey in regard to the lowlife establishments in the east of town, extracting from him the

information he needed. He changed out of his rumpled travelling clothes into a black clothing, covering the whole with a full-length cloak and a large bicorne, pulled down to shade his eyes. He scurried through Piccadilly, down Coventry Street, past Leicester Square and through the bustle of the theatres just opening for the evening ahead. The inn he wanted was down an alley off Monmouth Street. He wrapped his cloak more tightly about him and dodged the streetwalkers and the begging urchins, shoving one particularly pernicious little beggar into the gutter to get rid of him.

His heart was hammering by the time he reached the taproom of the inn. A sack-shaped landlord raked his appearance with a knowing eye. Morton might be dressed down in his own eyes, but the cut and quality of his clothes were still too good for the typical customer of the Hog and Boar.

‘Pint of beer,’ said Morton.

‘Hob or nob?’

‘Nob.’ The tankard slapped in front of him was tepid rather than cold. He scowled at it after one sip.

‘What lay you lookin’ for, cove?’ asked the innkeeper, regarding Morton beneath hooded eyes.

‘How did you know?’ Morton asked, amazed that this lazy looking innkeeper could tell instantly that he was not there merely to buy a vile tasting pint.

The landlord shrugged. ‘Plain as a pikestaff. What you wantin’? Jarkman? Flying porter? Dubber?’ He resumed wiping a clutch of tankards with a grey cloth.

‘Pray, speak English, man.’

‘You wantin’ a forger or a lock picker, or what?’

‘I need...’ Morton glanced about, ‘someone who can plant things.’

‘Gardener?’ The landlord looked up in surprise.

‘Plant evidence. Get into a house or two, take one thing and leave it behind somewhere else.’

‘How much you offerin’?’

‘How much would it cost?’

‘Depends if you want some figger or a cracker.’

‘Speak English, man,’ Morton snapped. ‘I want someone who knows what they’re doing. Someone reliable. Trustworthy.’

The landlord snorted. ‘We don’t hear words like them in here. Wait there,’ he said, slapping his cloth on the counter and ducking through a low archway into the next room.

Morton strained to hear the landlord’s voice; he heard him calling out, ‘Hoy, Lemmy, got a green for you, wantin’ a bit of a finicky lay.’ The landlord’s voice was drowned out by the noise of two chattering customers coming in. Morton scowled at them from under his hat and

shrank farther back into the gloom of his unlit corner of the taproom, not wanting to be seen if he could help it. He had a prickly sensation of being watched, and kept glancing about to see who it was, but he must be imagining things. Presently, the landlord returned. Morton caught a glimpse of a gangly man following close behind, but one minute the gangly figure was coming into the room, shielded from view by the landlord's bulk; the next moment he was leaning casually against the counter on the other side of Morton.

'Hear you lookin' for someone who can handle a few rum bobs,' said the man.

Morton jumped at being spoken to so close to his ear.

The man's eyes, small and dark beneath thick brows, roved constantly from left to right and when he spoke, his mouth seemed not to move.

'Pardon?' said Morton, wondering if he had imagined the voice. The man only waited for an answer, his eyes scanning about the room, his thin body in dark clothes almost melting into the shadows.

Morton cleared his throat. 'I'm looking for someone discreet and efficient to carry out a couple of delicate operations for me. Someone who can access a house or two without being seen. Take something from one place and place it in another and leave without anyone knowing they were there.'

'Where's these houses?'

'Sussex.'

The man said nothing in reply to this.

'Well, can you do it?'

'Can get into any house,' boasted the man calmly. 'Charge double for goin' out of town.'

'How much?'

The man finally looked at Morton. He studied his clothes, his hands, peered under his hat.

'I'm not *green*,' said Morton petulantly, feeling very much out of his depth. 'I want a professional job doing, and I don't want it ever traced back to me. So I won't be telling you my name or where I live, or anything other than what I want you to do.'

'How much?'

Morton hesitated. 'Ten pounds.'

The man gave a bark of laughter without moving his lips. Was it a laugh of joy? Morton wondered. But there was no expression of pleasure on the man's thin face.

'Fifteen?'

Another laugh.

Morton ground his teeth. 'Twenty. That's my final price.'

There was a silence, and Morton hoped the man was considering

his offer. He felt he was being worldly wise in not saying another word himself. Let the fellow think it really was his final offer. It would be hard to part with twenty pounds in cash as it was, but it would be worth it if the plan could be pulled off. It would be worth any amount to pull it off. He had to get that butler discredited and out of the way. He could not have him near his uncle, blabbing his mouth off. He took a leisurely sip of his beer to make himself look nonchalant.

‘Two hundred.’

He spat the beer out. ‘*What?* You’re gulling me! I’m not paying two hundred pounds for a bit of petty trumpery!’ He stood up, deciding to try his luck elsewhere.

‘As you like, cove,’ said the man from the shadows. ‘Or should I say, *Mr Butternock?*’

‘What? How? Why, you!’ sputtered Morton, looking around wildly to see who had given him away, but there were only two fellows tossing back shots in the corner of the room. ‘I don’t know who you think I am,’ said Morton, gripping the edges of his cloak, desperately trying to recover his composure, ‘but you are quite mistaken.’

The man ignored him and raised a hand to the landlord, who seemed to appear on cue with a bottle of something and a pair of cups. ‘I don’t make mistakes, Mister B,’ his shadowy companion assured him. He poured out two slugs. ‘Here, try this. You don’t want to be drinkin’ that brew. There’s good reason why the locals call this place the Hog and Wash. This ‘ere’s the landlord’s rum, fresh out o’ France. Bring me half the money this time tomorrow, and I’ll get right on it.’

‘Bring you—! A hundred—!’ Morton felt the familiar volcanic sensation moving up his chest, giving him a horrible burning sensation.

‘Never said a hundred pounds, Mister B. I said two hundred guineas. And I want gold, Mister B. None of your soft blunt.’

‘I can’t raise two hundred guineas by tomorrow,’ said Morton, the fire in his chest mixing with a slight faint feeling in his head. ‘I’ve changed my mind,’ he gasped. ‘Forget we ever spoke. You’re too expensive.’ He moved to hurry home. This was not turning out quite as he had hoped.

‘Wonder what your chick-a-biddy will think of what you’ve been hatching?’ The man said.

Morton ignored him, but the next words halted his step.

‘Prime rum article that Miss Tandy. S’pose she won’t care none to hear about our little chat, for she’ll get to be a rum mort when she’s a lady o’ the manor. She won’t care a fig ‘bout your plans, she’ll only think you’re a deep one.’

Morton gaped at him. ‘How the—?’ he began. ‘Who the—? Are you

blackmailing me?

'There's a good brag in Dorset Street,' the man advised. 'Only charge you ten per cent if you settle up in the first month.'

'A money lender?'

'Tell you what, an' I don't do this for every cove, but I've a takin' for you, Mister B. I'll get the brag to meet us here tomorrow. Private room in the back we can use, keep it all tight and cosy.'

Morton felt as though he were sinking into a morass of darkness. A fleeting thought of returning on the morrow with a horse pistol concealed under his cloak passed through his desperate mind.

'Cheer up, Mister B,' his tormentor counselled. 'I'm doin' you a good turn.'

'Good turn?'

'What's two hundred guineas, give or take a dab of interest and expenses to a *baron*.'

'But I'm not a baron,' Morton said weakly.

'Nor will be wi'out my help.' He winked, then drained his cup and smacked his lips. 'Go on,' he urged, nodding at Morton's cup. 'Tell me that ain't prime.'

Morton suddenly felt in need of strong drink and took the cup and downed it. It did nothing helpful for his heartburn, but there was a comforting fuzziness after a few minutes.

Two more shots were poured. 'Here's to you having all the gingerbread a cove could ever wish for,' said the man, raising his glass. 'And a diamond of a wife. And all for the modest price of two hundred Georges. I call that a round dealing. A tip top bargain.'

Put in those terms, it did seem a small price to pay, thought Morton resignedly as the third draught of white rum reached his brain. He even managed a lopsided smile.

'That's the spirit,' cheered on his new partner in crime.

When the bottle was drained, and Morton had been fleeced of all his cash to pay for it, he stumbled homewards.

'WHAT A CHUB,' the landlord said, as he and Lemmy watched Mr Butternock lurch out of the inn.

'Hope there's a shot of moonshine left for me,' said a new voice. A tall man stepped from behind a false wall where he had been watching and listening through the peephole.

'Think he'll be back to drop the blunt?' Lemmy asked the newcomer.

'Course he will,' said Symes.

'Get my little coz a bottle,' Lemmy said to the landlord. 'He's earned it. Dropped us a nice plump pigeon this time. Regular honey-fall.'

‘Serve him right,’ said Symes, taking Mr Butternock’s abandoned seat. ‘Miss Tandy’s too good for the likes of him. Knew that the first time I clapped eyes on him. ‘An she don’t care for him. Only puts up with him ‘cause her pa wants a title in the family.’

‘You is nuts over them Tandys o’ yours. We could make a ton of gingerbread workin’ together.’

Symes shook his head. ‘I’m not risking my neck all my days. That Tyburn rope came too close for comfort.’ He shivered. ‘Got me a clean bed, much as I want to eat, fancy togs. Decent pay. Get to nip round ‘ere to Uncle Tod’s whenever the family’s out for the evenin’, don’t I?’ He nodded at his uncle, who was serving a new customer. ‘That Mrs Tandy is the finest woman in England. She took me on, said she’d give me a clean slate. Nothing I wouldn’t do for ‘er.’

‘Rum luck you happenin’ to see the bleater come in tonight,’ said Lemmy.

‘Weren’t it just.’ Symes grinned into his cup before draining it. ‘His lackey feller’s been hanging about the Square. Don’t know what his lay is; spying on Miss Tandy is my bet. I put it in his ear that if he ever wants a job doing, this is the place. Some coves is so predictable.’



CYRIL COFFEY LIMPED into Hanover Square under the cover of the pre-dawn gloom. His master had come home rather foxed last night and reeking of rum. Mr Butternock was not a happy drunk; he was a mean one. Before dropping off to sleep, Mr Butternock had charged Cyril to get back to the Tandy house and find out more about the French fellow working there, seeing as Cyril had learnt nothing from the Frenchies in the Strand. Mr Butternock wanted to know where this man had come from, and who his family was. Cyril was to find out anything and everything he could, and not come home until he had something.

Cyril decided his best bet was to catch one of the lower servants early in the morning, before the house was awake. He didn't want to see that tall footman, he was too sly that fellow. He'd rifled his sleeping master's pockets, only to find them empty, so had to make do with a handful of shillings scattered about his master's desk. He wasn't setting up a long watch on an empty belly.

He left his master's lodgings, purchased a hot pie for his breakfast from the back door of a bakehouse, and a couple of currant buns which he tucked under his hat for later, in between his handkerchief and pencil stub and his lucky rabbit foot, and made his way to Hanover Square to begin his dawn vigil.

His tedious watch was eventually rewarded by spying a young maid struggling out of the kitchen door with a rolled-up rug. He took his chance and hopped down the narrow stairs to the basement, calling out, 'Let me 'elp you, miss! Here, let me take this end and we'll get it over the railings just so.'

The scrawny maid mumbled something that might have been a word of thanks, or might have been a rebuttal, but Cyril threw the rug over the railings before she could say anything more.

She turned her face to him when this task had been performed, and he exclaimed, 'Lor! You're a sight for sore eyes. Pretty as a picture.' It was a blatant lie, for the girl had red eyes and blotchy skin, as though she'd been crying.

She was unmoved by his flattery and turned her head as though to call out to someone in the kitchen. He thought fast.

'Sorry, miss. Don't mean to be so forward. Let me help get the dust out. Little thing like you shouldn't be doing rough work. Why, I would 'ave thought you was some upper housemaid, you don't look like you ought to be beating rugs.'

This was a better aimed compliment. The girl said archly, 'I *am* a chamber maid, as it 'appens. Only beatin' this, 'cause it got ash on it.' She scowled at the ashen stains marring the pink and green woven design.

'Everyone has little accidents,' said Cyril. 'Hope you didn't get a hiding for it?'

She sniffed. 'No. Well, only a bit of an ear pull from Missus Sedgemoor. She says I'm to get every speck out or I'll be in the scullery if I can't be trusted in the bedrooms.' Another sniff.

'Hear you've got some Frenchie in the house,' said Cyril, deciding to jump straight in. 'Don't think he's a spy, do you?' He winked. 'Good money to be had for turning in a spy.'

'Mr Brown ain't no spy,' said the girl. 'He's a gent. He pretended to stay asleep when I dropped the scuttle this mornin', but I knows I must 'ave waked him, 'cause Missus Sedgemoor said it were a racket to wake the dead.'

'Do you clean his rooms?'

'I clean all the bedrooms,' was the proud reply. 'I make all the fires up early.' Her eyes grew round as she said, 'Only think! They have a fire in the morning even in *May*.'

'You never seen anything in his rooms that makes you think he might be a spy, then?'

'No. Why you askin'?' She seemed to recall something. 'Mister Grouse said I were to take care, 'cause some feller's been hangin' round here.'

'Well, it ain't me,' said Cyril with an unconvincing laugh. He was getting nowhere fast. She took a broad swing with her carpet beater, and a cloud of ash rose into the air and made them both break into sneezes.

Cyril pulled off his hat to take out his handkerchief. The pair of currant buns tumbled out along with his 'kerchief. The maid's eye's lighted upon them with interest.

'Want one?' Cyril asked, seeing her look.

'Can I?' The carpet beating and all its attendant shame was forgotten.

'I'll trade you,' said Cyril, holding the bun just out of reach.

'For what?' She looked doubtful.

'For some information.'

'What about?'

'About your Frenchman.'

She turned away. 'I don't know what your game is.'

'All I want to know is who he is and where he's come from.'

'He's Mr Brown, and he's come from France,' she said scornfully.

She was losing interest again, so he pushed the bun into her hand.

She stared at it, then grinned and took a bite.

'What's yer favourite cake?' he asked, amazed at how fast her little jaw could work.

'Cream puffs,' she said, her mouth full.

'I'll bring you a cream puff if you'll find me summat on the Frenchman. Some papers that tells somethin' about him. There must be some in his room.'

She licked her fingers and eyed the second bun. 'I ain't never seen no papers in his room.'

'They'd be stuffed away, in a desk or box or under his mattress.'

She shook her head. 'I dust all over. You goin' to eat that?'

'Think, miss. You sure you ain't seen nothin'?' He half held out the bun. 'No pictures of his family?'

She frowned. 'There's a locket. On a chain. In the desk. Pretty, it is. Got a lady painted inside. Like a princess.'

'Any letterin' on it?'

She frowned again. 'There's some swirly words on the back.'

'Would you show me? Just a peep?'

'I can't take nothin' from the rooms!'

'I don't want you to steal nowt, just show it me for half a minute, and then put it right back again.'

She shook her head resolutely and took up her carpet beater.

'I'll come back wiv' a box of cream puffs.'

The beater paused midair. 'A whole box?'

The kitchen door opened and a woman's voice called up, 'Are you done with that rug yet? There's water to draw!'

The girl gave him a panicked look. 'Go away,' she hissed.

'Three o'clock,' hissed back Cyril. 'I'll meet you here at three. A whole box of puffs, mind, for one peek at that locket.' He held out the second bun. 'Deal?'

She looked at it, looked back at the door, snatched up the bun and tucked it inside her apron.

'Lottie!'

'Comin', Missus Sedgemoor!' She swung the beater, and Cyril darted away before the dust cloud reached his nose.

HENRY DRESSED Ralph for the evening ahead. The Tandy family and Laura were to attend the opera in the Haymarket. 'Hate Italian singing,' grumbled Ralph. 'Don't understand a word of it.'

'A beautiful language,' argued Henry. 'Though not as pleasant to my ear as French.'

'I like good old-fashioned English. I like English food and English

singing. You know what you're eating and you know what you're hearing. You know where you are.'

Henry was aware that Ralph's dissatisfaction did not directly stem from his dislike of Catalini. The matter of Ralph's debt weighed heavily on them both. Henry knew he had a duty to report it to Mr Tandy, but to do so would bring down Mr Tandy's wrath on them both. Ralph feared being sent into the army, while Henry knew he would be dismissed. Perhaps he could find a position in another house; his meteoric rise to fashionable fame had brought him many whispered offers of employment, but he liked the Tandys. And he especially liked Miss Dymond. He was sure she was in trouble with an unsuitable lover and the thought of it gave him a heavy feeling. He put the last fold of Ralph's cravat into place with a sigh.

'Ain't it up to the mark?' Ralph asked.

'It is as it should be. It was not the cravat that made me sigh. I was thinking of something else.'

'Don't know what you've got to sigh over,' said Ralph, with all the petulance of a sheltered nineteen-year-old. 'You ain't under the hatches. Pa's going to send me into the army as quick as lightning when he finds out about it.'

'How long have you got?'

Ralph gave a little shudder. 'Lender's given me a week. Then he starts counting interest. Need to make a payment quick, or the duns'll be at the door.'

'*Quel fou,*' said Henry under his breath. He knew Ralph had no money left to make any debt payments. 'Have you sold any neckties?'

'Sold a pair to a clerk looking in the window at Blundell's. Manager in Blundell's looked down his snooty nose at 'em, said the usual tripe about his customers being of the class who got valets to tie their cravats. Don't want no readymade flummery. That's what he called them. Readymade flummery.'

'But the clerk bought one.'

'Bought two. An American and an Oriental. He ain't got a valet to tie his, has he?'

'Perhaps there lies your answer, Master Tandy.'

'What do you mean? Lor' this waistcoat feels tight.'

'You've gained some weight.'

'I get a hankering for sweetmeats when I'm at low tide. Ma's just the same.'

'Your good Mama does not borrow money from unscrupulous lenders nor visit the lowest of gambling dens.'

'She don't need to. Pa lets her spend what she likes. I've got to make my own way in the world. Blast. I've put a run in these stockings.'

‘They should be rolled up, not yanked.’ Henry went impatiently to the chest of drawers to get a fresh pair. He hated ruined clothes. ‘I wonder, Master Tandy, how is it you gamble in such low places and not in the usual haunts of gentlemen? I gather the gentlemen play in clubs in St. James’s, not the east end.’

‘They play too deep for my pockets,’ said Ralph. ‘Gamble away houses and family fortunes, some of ‘em. Look at Tiff’s beau, that Partington fellow. His pa lost the family fortune gambling. Wonder if Tiff will marry him.’

Henry was too busy selecting shoe buckles to reply, so Ralph chattered on alone. ‘Prefer Partington to that Butternock fellow.’ Ralph gave a short laugh. ‘Ma calls him Buttercrook. She’s a downy one. What do you think of him?’

‘Who? Mr Partington or Mr Butternock?’ Henry secured the buckles to Ralph’s evening pumps.

‘Butternock.’

‘It’s not my place to pass comment on Miss Tandy’s suitors.’

‘Fustian,’ said Ralph. ‘Man to man here. What do you think of him? I think he’s a snirp.’

‘I’m not sure what a *snirp* is.’

‘But what do you think of him?’

Henry put the pumps down near Ralph’s chair. ‘What I think of him is that he has a way of looking at me the way your manager at Blundell’s looks at your cravats. But what offends me most is his choice of breeches. A man of his girth ought never to wear white.’

‘Lor’, you’re as downy as Ma. I think he might be leading the race, though. He might have a stupid name and not be all the crack, but he’s going to be rich as Croesus, and a baron to boot when he inherits.’

‘Leave your hair alone, Master Tandy,’ Henry said sternly. ‘The arrangement is just as it ought to be.’

Ralph dropped his hands obediently and resumed his observations of his sister’s marital dilemma. ‘Partington will be an earl one day, but if his pa lives forever, he’ll just be a penniless cove lookin’ to marry Tiff for her money.’

‘Oh no,’ cried Henry.

‘Tis the truth.’

‘You have a ladder in your stockings,’ said Henry, pointing at Ralph’s left leg.

‘Blast.’

Henry crossed the room to fetch a third new pair of stockings.

Ralph sat down heavily on his chair and dragged off his ruined stockings. His thoughts swung away from his sister’s personal dilemma back to his own. ‘Wish I could get in at Boodle’s or Watier’s,’ he

grumbled. 'They're the places to be seen. Pa won't buy me membership. Said if I keep my nose clean and don't run up any more debts, he'll get me into Boodle's next season. That ain't going to happen now, is it?'

'Roll them, Master Tandy. They are made of fine silk, not toughened leather.' Henry stood with hands on hips watching the fate of Ralph's stockings with anxiety. 'You wouldn't be able to wear that old gambling hat of yours at Boodle's,' he commented.

'Tossed it in the fireplace,' said Ralph. 'Didn't bring me any luck.'

'That's some consolation,' said Henry, glad to hear that Ralph had abandoned gambling for now. If only it had happened sooner, he wouldn't be losing a good position.

Ralph finally managed to roll his stockings on without ripping them. The buttons on the bottom of his knee breeches were secured, his shoes were buckled, and Henry took a final look at his workmanship, twirling his finger in the air to direct Ralph to turn slowly round so he could check his appearance at all angles.

'What were you saying about my neckties?' Ralph asked as he lumbered round in a circle. 'You said, *there lies your answer.*'

Henry recalled his train of thought before it had been rudely interrupted by Ralph's brutal treatment of silk stockings. 'Men without valets,' he said. 'Forget the high-class shops who look down on readymade clothes and find a way to reach the men who want to dress smartly but aren't rich enough to have a dresser.'

Ralph pulled a face, unconvinced.

'Excuse me while I check on the ladies,' said Henry, bowing neatly and leaving Ralph to his depressed musings. He would look in on Miss Dymond first to see how she liked the new opera gown. He had put a deal of thought into the design of it, wanting it to be perfect for her: a gown that made her feel womanly and confident and beautiful.

He hesitated a few steps from her door, suddenly realising how hard it was going to be to leave her when his services were terminated. She was a quiet and gentle influence, and that feeling of peace he felt when he was with her was soothing to the displacement that had haunted him since his youth. He liked her straightforward expression, without all the coquetry or vanity so common among all the ladies he had dressed over the years. He liked her understated elegance; she clearly had no idea how attractive she was, being in the role of a paid servant, wearing her dress and hair as plain as she could that she might be invisible. It had been a pleasure to watch her slowly transform, degree by degree. And when he had kissed her and kept her close to him in the press of the crowd outside the church, it had felt right and natural, as though they belonged together.

And then he remembered that she had some secret. She had a lover

who lived in a place called Marshalsea. Either this secret lover worked in that place, or was an inmate, for Ralph had said it was a notorious debtor's jail. This remembrance clouded his thoughts. He must take care. He must not lose any more of his heart. The old loneliness, the old longing to belong, it could trip him up. He could not afford to let his head go.

He reached out to tap on the door, but with his emotions held firmly in check. Miss Dymond's heart belonged to another, and he must leave her soon.

LAURA FELT like the pendulum in the grandfather clock in the Tandys' hallway. First her emotions swung all one way in a surge of happiness and hopefulness. The source of such hope being wrapped up securely in Mr Brown. She touched her lips where he had kissed her. She had never been romantically kissed before. Ralph Tandy had kissed her cheek once at Christmas, but he had kissed every female present in a burst of seasonal cheer, so it had not signified anything. It had been a brotherly kiss. But Mr Brown's had not felt brotherly.

She smoothed down the new opera gown, wishing she had a full-length mirror to see herself in. It was uncanny how Mr Brown could design something so perfectly in harmony with her taste. It was remarkable how he knew how to flatter and fit her figure so exactly with his design so that it seemed an act of intimacy. It was not a showy gown, she would not have liked it if it were, but it was very elegant with its smooth fall of dark blue silk with the lighter shade of blue on the sheer over-gown. The sleeves were fashionably short and puffed; the train had a delicate hem of embroidered roses that made her think of the rose petals raining down outside St. Anne's church. He had even ordered slippers in the same shade of blue and an opera cape to replace her shabby cloak.

There was a soft tap at the door of her room and she moved to open it, feeling the pleasant, silky swish of her skirts as she walked. She hoped it was Mr Brown, come to check on his work, and was not disappointed when she opened the door and saw him there. She could not hide her pleasure. She felt her stomach lurch at the sight of him and her cheeks warmed, but she made herself look directly at him. The gown made her feel more confident, more womanly, more able to meet his eyes.

But he did not meet her look. His eyes swept over her gown. At first she thought he looked admiringly, as a lover might do, but perhaps she imagined it, for the look was gone in an instant, and there was only that detached look he had when he was assessing his handiwork.

'You look just as I thought, Miss Dymond,' he said with a polite

smile, still not meeting her eyes.

'Thank you,' she said, her voice quiet from the disappointment that was squeezing her chest.

'You like it?' he asked, a flicker of concern passing over his face at her subdued response.

'How could I not? It is...perfect.'

He smiled again, but it was only his polite smile. He did not love her. That was what that restrained, polite smile told her. The kiss, the way he had held her close, it had meant nothing to him. Her confidence and feeling of beauty drained away, and she felt she was only plain Laura Dymond, living only to please her mistress that she might earn a wage to support Frederick. It was only herself and Freddy.

What a fool she had been to forget that. How disloyal to have thought of her own happiness and forget Freddy's misery. What a selfish creature she was, as well as a fool. New gowns and hairstyles did not change anything. She had allowed her head to be turned by the first young man who had showed her kindness. She had deluded herself into thinking he felt the same way. She closed her eyes, not wishing to show tears in front of this detached, polite man.

'I must finish getting ready, Mr Brown,' she said. 'Excuse me. And thank you again for another beautiful design.' In her effort to speak calmly, her words sounded cold and stilted, and she thought he looked surprised and hurt. She wanted to say something more, to assure him that she really was grateful, but she could not speak another word without betraying herself. She looked at a spot on the floor, instead of at his face. He also said nothing more, only bowed his head in acknowledgment and turned away. She shut the door on him quickly.

She had a quick bout of crying, but could not let herself sink into misery. She had a role to fulfil in attending upon Miss Tandy. So she washed her face from the water in her washstand ewer, hoping she did not look blotchy and red. That look of surprise and pain on Mr Brown's face haunted her. He did not deserve to be so rudely treated. He had only ever been kind to her, it was not his fault that she had let her feelings run away.



THE FOLLOWING MORNING WAS SUNDAY, and Henry woke to the sound of the first church bells ringing clearly in the still air. In France he had attended the Catholic Church of the Bruneau's, but he had been raised to share his mother's Anglican faith. It was an unusual circumstance, but his father had been indifferent to religion, and allowed his English wife to have her own way. She had said it might be important for Henry's future, but when Henry had asked why, she'd only smiled sadly and said that he might be an English lord one day, as well as a French vicomte.

Henry lay in bed listening to the bells and thinking of how his life had not turned out the way his mother had foreseen. A sudden longing for some connection to his past made him jump out of bed and dress quickly. He would go to church that morning; it would be the first time he had gone in a long while. The family would still be asleep, having returned home in the early hours. What an unnatural rhythm of life these society people led, he thought, as he pulled a clean, pressed linen shirt over his head, and tugged the cuffs and neckline into place. If he were rich, he thought, taking his slate-coloured waistcoat from the press, he would not lead such a dissipated life. He would gladly give up the glitter and glamour for a life in the country. A remembrance of the sweeping grounds of Eastersham came before him, but he pushed it away. No use thinking of what might have been.

He almost bumped into Miss Dymond at the top of the staircase. There were no windows to light the hallway leading to the bedrooms, and in her dark coat and bonnet she had been a shadowy figure gliding noiselessly along, so as not to wake the sleeping family.

'Oh, it's you,' she said, as though she had thought him as ghostlike as herself.

'You are going to church?'

She nodded.'

He hesitated, wanting to ask her to accompany him, but reminding himself just in time that he must not spend any more time alone with her. So he closed his mouth and gestured for her to walk down the stairs ahead of him. She gave him what seemed a reproachful look, but he could not be sure in the dim light. He followed her down, glad to see that she was wearing her new walking coat. He had picked out that dusky shade of plum himself, knowing that it would put a flattering colour into her cheeks. The matching bonnet showed off her

graceful neck just as he had designed it to. He was absorbed in watching her figure moving ahead of him, so that it was a surprise when they reached the bottom of the staircase and she turned to face him, almost bumping noses with him, not realising how close behind he was.

‘Oh, I beg your pardon,’ she said, stepping back as though the close contact had alarmed her. He had caught the scent of the rosemary rinse she used on her hair, and the lavender soap she used, and the smell made him think of French lavender fields, and suddenly he did not want to be careful and keep away from her; instead he wanted to savour these last days and hours he had left before Mr Tandy sent him away.

‘May I accompany you to church?’ He held out an arm.

She examined his face for a moment as though searching it for something. She looked confused and flustered. ‘The church I like to go to is not a fashionable one,’ she said, noting his immaculate appearance.

‘I don’t go to church to be seen by mere mortals, Miss Dymond. I go in hope of being seen by God.’

‘It is quite a long walk,’ she added. ‘It’s outside the city.’

‘A long walk on a dry spring day is my idea of a pleasant way to spend a morning.’

Her look of doubt melted, and he admired the way her whole face bloomed into beauty when she was happy. She took his arm, and they walked out into a morning of sunshine laced with a fresh breeze.

They had walked the length of two streets without speaking. But it was enough to be side by side. Miss Dymond broke the silence first.

‘I had thought that French people were generally Catholic, Mr Brown.’

‘Generally, they are. But my mother had me baptised into the Anglican Church.’

‘So your mother did not take your father’s faith when she married?’

‘She did not. My father respected her wishes in all things.’

‘He must have loved her very much.’

‘Yes. They were very happy together.’

‘How fortunate they were to find each other,’ said Miss Dymond with a wistful air. Perhaps she was thinking of her lover who lived or worked in the Marshalsea. He wondered if he dared try to bring the subject up. But if he did, he would have to admit to having followed her that afternoon and seeing where she went. He turned the subject away from themselves. ‘I hope Miss Tandy finds the same happiness that our parents did,’ he said.

‘Yes,’ said Laura doubtfully. ‘Though I think it a dangerous thing to

choose a marriage partner for their title. I think one should choose a partner on the grounds of mutual affection and an agreement of ideas on the most important things in life.'

'Perhaps Miss Tandy will be fortunate enough to find those things *and* a title.'

'Perhaps. I think she gets on very well with Mr Partington, and he seems a pleasant man. But he has no fortune, and a dreadful family. Mr Butternock is set to inherit a large estate and a title, but I do not think Tiffany likes him very much. I worry about her future.'

'And what will become of your future, Miss Dymond, when your mistress is married and goes off to her new home?'

'I'm not sure. Mrs Tandy has said I can remain with her as her own companion, which is very kind of her.'

'But?' pressed Henry, catching the note of reluctance.

Miss Dymond did not answer. Again, the shadowy memory of her secret lover rose between them. Perhaps she was intending to marry when Miss Tandy no longer needed her services.

'Should you prefer a home of your own to a life in service?' he probed. 'You would prefer to marry than be a companion?'

She gave him a troubled look. 'Don't worry,' he said lightly, thinking that she was troubled by him being too forward, 'I was not proposing for myself.' Now, why did she look even more distressed than before? She turned her head slightly away from him, as though admiring the view to her left; but there was only a row of shop fronts to be looked at, all of them shuttered and closed for Sunday.

He gave up the subject; clearly Miss Dymond did not trust him enough to speak of her life outside the Tandys' home. He could not be offended that she kept part of her life a secret, for he did the exact same thing. The sense of connection he had felt in walking with her vanished, as though the fresh breeze had carried something fragile away. They were two strangers walking through the streets of London, only bound together by the loosest of ties. He had been deluding himself into feeling there was anything more between them.

PETER CANNING CHECKED for the fourth time that the tray for the doctor held everything the doctor liked best to partake of. Dr Farrington preferred a little glass of sherry and was partial to a piece of Mrs King's game pie. Mr Canning paced between the sitting room where the repast was laid out, and the hallway, where he would hear the physician's step as he descended from Lord Lansdowne's chamber.

'You'll wear out the rug, Mr Canning,' said the housekeeper, coming out of a door that led to the servants' wing.

Mr Canning did not return Mrs Robertson's faint smile. He only nodded an acknowledgment and resumed his pacing.

Mrs Robertson was the only member of staff who would dare speak so directly to the butler, but they had worked alongside each other for more than twenty years. 'You've been as jumpy as a grasshopper since you came back from London last week.' She drew near and put a hand on his arm. He jumped, startled to find Mrs Robertson so close, looking up at him with her shrewd but kindly eyes. The rare touch of another person was enough to pierce a little crack in his carefully arranged exterior. He blinked at Mrs Robertson as though seeing her for the first time. 'See?' she said. 'Jumpy as a grasshopper. You did a brave thing, Mr Canning,' she added quietly. 'But we don't have to bear things alone all the time. We're old comrades, you and I, are we not?'

Mr Canning nodded slightly, still mesmerised by the unexpected proximity of his colleague. For the first time in twenty years, he was suddenly aware that Mrs Robertson, who was really a Miss Robertson, the Mrs being an honorary title for her position, was not merely an efficient and redoubtable housekeeper, but a *woman*.

'I...' he stammered, amazed to feel his childhood stutter coming back for the first time in his mature years. 'I...only hope it was not...deceitful, what I did.'

'You, deceitful, Mr Canning? You are the most honest and truest man I've ever known. What you did in going to Mr Lingham, you did *because* you are honest.'

'Th...thank you, Mrs Robertson,' Mr Canning said quietly. She looked as though she would say more, but the top stair above their heads squeaked. The sound jolted Mr Canning back into his usual reserved self. He stepped away from Mrs Robertson, feeling as though a spell had been broken. The physician came slowly down the stairs, and Mr Canning greeted him with the information that he had set out the sherry in the sitting room. He led the way, anxious to hear of his master's health. It was paramount to the happiness of the staff at Eastersham that their master lived as long as possible, to ward off the evil day when Mr Butternock swept in and ruined their lives, perhaps even turning them all from the house.

'How is my lord?' Mr Canning asked when he had poured the sherry.

The physician shook his head over his glass. 'Not so good today. Not so good.' He downed the sherry, smacking his lips appreciatively over it. 'Think I must send word to Mr Lingham. If there's no improvement tomorrow, I'll write from here before I go and send it express.'

'Is my lord really so bad?' Mr Canning gripped the back of a

nearby chair. His worst fears were coming to pass. 'Surely not?'

The physician nodded sadly. 'Not long now. A week, two at best.' He held out his sherry glass, then made a little *ahem* to prompt the butler to serve him. 'Dear me,' he said, catching sight of Canning's face. 'You look very pale, Canning. Take a seat, man. Take a glass of sherry yourself. Very revivifying. It's the shock.'

Mr Canning did not have time to sink down into a chair and knock back a revivifying draught of his master's sherry, for at that moment there came a note for him, delivered by Charles, the second footman.

'Just delivered, Mr Canning,' said Charles, handing over the note.

Mr Canning opened it with shaky fingers.

'Are you well, Mr Canning, sir?' said Charles. He shot a look at the physician. 'Not like Mr Canning to look so peaky,' he whispered.

'Had a shock,' the physician assured him, taking up a forkful of pie. 'Do sit down, Canning. Pull up a chair for him,' he ordered the footman.

'No, no,' said Canning, waving the note and turning confusedly between the table where he was supposed to be waiting on the physician and the doorway. 'Must go. Urgent summons to The Laurels. Send for the trap, Charles. No, see to Dr Farrington. See to the sherry...' Mr Canning trailed off and walked dazedly from the room. The master was going to die in the next week or two. Time was running out. And now there was this urgent summoning to Sir Greaves' manor house three miles away. Why should Sir Greaves want him to call so urgently? It was very peculiar, but he had best attend upon him. It was the respectful thing to do.

IT WAS ALMOST three hours later when Mr Canning returned to Eastersham. He made his way to his little office and was intercepted en route by the housekeeper.

'I understand you've come from The Laurels, Mr Canning,' she said enquiringly. 'I expect they were considerate enough to offer you luncheon?'

'What? Oh, no, Mrs Robertson. I was not offered luncheon.'

'Then I shall send you a tray directly, for if you don't mind me saying so, you look a little pale and could do with some nourishment.'

'I'm not hungry, Mrs Robertson. Just a pot of tea, if you would be so kind.'

He was aware of the housekeeper's shrewd eyes upon him. 'May I enquire as to what the urgent business was you were called on?' she said. 'It was an unusual summoning, to be sure.'

'I really don't know, Mrs Robertson.' He met her gaze. 'I was put in the parlour and I waited for nigh on an hour, and then word came to say that it must have been some mistake, for Sir Greaves did not recall

sending for me.'

'Oh. How very odd. Was Lady Greaves not present?'

'No, she was out on calls.' He shook his head. 'Very odd, as you say.'

'And to keep you sitting an hour. Shabby treatment, and I'm sorry if I'm too bold in saying so. I'll fetch your tea, Mr Canning.'

MR CANNING FORGOT about the odd note from Sir Greaves. His mind was too full of his concerns over his dying master. The physician called again in the morning and pronounced his lordship to be continuing in a state of decline.

The evening meal in the servants' hall was a subdued affair. The whole household was aware that the master was worsening, and that the master's lawyer in London had been sent for.

A heavy banging at the door of the manor caused the silent staff to look with alarm at one another. Who would be hammering on the door like that so late in the day?

Charles, the second footman, crammed his last piece of treacle pudding into his mouth, not wanting to miss out on his favourite sweet. Then he got up noisily, scraping his chair on the floor and reaching for his wig.

He returned a few minutes later, looking as pale as his wig, with his eyes wide and round as a pudding bowl.

'Who was it, Charles?' Mr Canning asked.

'Constables, sir,' said Charles. 'For you.'

'For me?'

A tall, thin man in uniform stepped briskly into the hall, followed by two younger men in uniform. Mr Canning got to his feet.

'Mr Peter Canning?' the officer enquired.

'Yes, Constable. What can I do for you?'

'Got a warrant here.' A piece of paper was waved.

'A warrant for what, Constable?'

'To search your premises.'

'My premises? Search for what, Constable?'

'Are your rooms through there, Mr Canning?'

'Why, yes, but, I repeat, *what* are you searching for?'

The Constable waved his finger in the direction of Mr Canning's rooms, and the young men in uniform made haste in that direction.

'At some time yesterday after noon o'clock,' said the Constable, 'there was a theft of a pair of jewelled snuff boxes from the parlour room of The Laurels.'

'A pair of snuff boxes?' Mr Canning looked bewildered. He felt someone move to stand at his side. It was Mrs Robertson.

'Very valuable. Jewels and gold.'

‘What are you inferring, Constable?’ said Mrs Robertson, her voice brittle. ‘Mr Canning is the most upright man alive.’

‘Not inferring nothing, ma’am, just stating the facts.’

‘Found ‘em, sir!’ came the voice of one of the young men. He appeared in the doorway brandishing a golden, bejewelled snuff box in each hand.

There was a collective gasp from the servants. Mr Canning felt Mrs Robertson’s hand upon his arm for the second time in two days. ‘It’s not true,’ said Mrs Robertson. ‘It’s *not* true!’

‘Mr Peter Canning, I arrest you for a charge of theft. Bring him along, lads.’

‘Where are you taking him?’ Mrs Robertson’s voice was shrill in a rare show of emotion. ‘This is a mistake! Mr Canning is the most honest man I know!’

Mr Canning’s arms were seized, and he was propelled out of the hall. Through the haze of shock, he dimly perceived what was really happening. Mr Butternock’s face, twisted with anger, loomed before him in his memory. *You’ll pay for this, Canning.*



MORTON BUTTERNOCK FELT his heartburn rising. The east-end rogue he had paid a princely sum to in order to get Canning out of the way had just showed up to demand his second payment. The cheek of it, turning up at the door as though he were a respectable visitor instead of a crooked guttersnipe.

‘I don’t have that kind of money on me,’ Morton snapped, looking anxiously left and right down the street, not wanting anyone to see who was on his doorstep. ‘How did you know where I live?’

The man, known as Lemmy, winked in reply. ‘I’ll get the brag to call round tonight, shall I, guv?’

‘I need proof,’ said Morton. ‘You might be gulling me. I’m not green.’

Lemmy shrugged his narrow shoulders. ‘You tipped off the law. You should know if they did their job. I know I did mine.’ Lemmy’s voice had changed from affable to hard, and he leaned forward, looming over Morton like a lengthening shadow. Morton drew back, cringing at the look in Lemmy’s eyes, knowing instinctively that this man, who knew his name and address without being told, was not a man to trifle with. Morton scowled up at him. ‘I’ll be there after dark.’

‘See you tonight, Mister B.’ A final wink, and Lemmy slipped away as soundlessly as a ferret slipping into his hole. Morton shut the door and turned the key.

He reminded himself that the end result of all this would be worth the unpleasantness of having to deal with rogues. As the fifth Baron Lansdowne, he would be influential with magistrates and constables. He might even be a magistrate himself, then he could send all the scaff and raff to their demise. This thought comforted him in part, and he went to his dressing room, ready to vent abuse on his valet to finish cheering himself up. Then he recalled that Coffey was not yet home. The miserable wretch had claimed he had an assignation with one of the Tandys’ housemaids. The maid was being bribed to show him something belonging to the Frenchman that might shed light on his identity. Coffey had better not come back empty handed.

He didn’t have to wait long. There was a scratch at the door and Morton hissed through it, ‘Is that you, Coffey?’

A mumbled reply came back in Coffey’s whiny voice. Morton opened the door and yanked his servant inside.

‘Well?’ he demanded. ‘Have you got anything?’

‘Yessir.’ A creased and stained handkerchief was taken from the

crown of Coffey's hat.

'Never mind blowing your nose, I'll wring it for you, you useless blighter, I'll—'

'Look 'ere!' urged Coffey, shaking out the cloth. A trio of currants rolled to the floor. 'I didn't have no paper, so I wrote it here.' He pointed at some faint pencil marks on the cloth.

'What is it?' Morton snatched the cloth, holding it under the pool of light from a lamp.

'It's the name what was on the locket.'

'Locket? Are you spinning me some Banbury tale?'

'The Frenchman's locket. The maid found it in his room. Got a picture of a woman inside, very fine, like a duchess, and on the back there's letters carved and they say them words.'

Morton screwed up his eyes to decipher the pencilled marks. '*Elizabeth de Courtenay*.' His features twisted into a frown.

'Do it tell you anythin?'' said Coffey hopefully.

'Perhaps,' Morton said slowly. It seemed too much of a coincidence, but this was solid proof. If that locket was the Brown fellow's mother, then he really was the grandson of Uncle Mort. This changed everything. He tossed the handkerchief back. 'And that's the only thing the maid could find? No papers, no letters?'

'Nothing,' said Coffey. 'She looked all over. He didn't bring nothing with him to the Tandy house 'cept his clothes and his sewing box.'

'Fetch my coat and boots.' He was going to call on his uncle's lawyer and demand to know why he had been forbidden to see his uncle last week, and while he was at it, he would find out if the lawyer knew anything about the connection between this Brown fellow and the name of de Courtenay, and then he would decided what to do about this Brown fellow.

THERE WAS a small crowd of people outside the office of Mr Lingham, all of them looking decidedly shabby. Morton elbowed his way through them, brandishing his cane and calling out, 'Stand aside! Out of my way!'

'Oy! Take yer turn like the rest of us!' one of the crowd hollered back.

'Queue jumper!' accused another.

'Mr Lingham isn't available,' said the lawyer's clerk, jumping up from his perch at his desk to rush between Morton and the door to the office.

'He'll see me,' said Morton, darting to the door and tugging it open before the clerk could reach him.

'What is it now?' growled Mr Lingham, his head bent over his desk.

'Sorry, sir,' cried the clerk, following Morton close behind, 'he just

barged in!’

Mr Lingham looked up. ‘Oh, it’s you.’ He waved away the clerk. ‘It’s alright, Fisher.’ He covered the document he had been working on with a sheet of blotting paper and regarded Morton with an unfriendly eye.

‘There’s a crowd of ruffians outside your office, Mr Lingham.’ Morton took a seat, placing his cane between his knees.

‘I am aware of that, Mr Butternock.’

‘What do they want?’

‘Same as you, I should think.’

‘Same as me? What do you mean?’

‘Money, Mr Butternock. They have been coming by the dozen since that advertisement went into the papers.’

‘Ah, I see. They want the reward. And what a reward it is. Five hundred pounds. Astonishing. I wonder that my uncle should part with such a sum.’

‘Mr Butternock, I only give consultations by appointment, and I do not have you in my appointment diary this morning.’

Morton returned the lawyer’s look of dislike, deciding in that moment that Mr Lingham would not be looking after the estate’s legal affairs once *he* was the head of the family.

‘I called upon my dear uncle and was refused admittance. The servants were insolent and manhandled me abominably, and no one would tell me why I was shown such abuse.’

‘I should have though it was obvious.’

‘Well, it is not. I thought you lawyers were trained in not making assumptions.’

‘And if I tell you, you will go away directly?’

Morton gave a prim look over his cane.

Mr Lingham put down his pen. ‘My client, Lord Lansdowne, has a notion that you knew of his grandson’s existence in England, and suspicions that you may have tried to conceal the fact.’

Morton made his best look of outrage. ‘Preposterous! How could I have known?’

‘It was suggested to him by someone who had seen the young man.’

‘You mean his butler, of course. That toad-eating good-for-nothing has been hoodwinking my poor uncle for years.’

‘Precisely what do you mean by *hoodwinking*, sir?’

‘He’s a viper in the bosom, Mr Lingham. A veritable viper. He lies, he steals, he’s a *pilferer*.’

Mr Lingham did not look convinced. He picked up his pen again. ‘You asked me the reason, and I have told you all I know. Now I bid you good day, I am a busy man.’

‘Am I out of the will?’ Morton gripped his cane with both hands.

‘I am not at liberty to say. Client confidentiality.’

Morton ground his teeth, his mind racing. If his uncle had changed his will, it would be the end of everything. Then a gleam of light shone into the murky recesses of his mind. ‘He can’t have changed his will,’ he said with a stab of triumph. ‘For you have not been down to Eastersham to witness it.’

‘I can tell you nothing more, Mr Butternock. My clerk will show you out.’

As if hearing the summons, the clerk tugged the door open. ‘Express just come, sir. Marked urgent.’

Morton’s sharp eyes saw the seal on the back of the letter: it was embossed with the letter ‘L’ in swirling curlicues. His uncle had just such a seal. He watched greedily as the lawyer snapped it open with a paperknife and scanned the lines. Mr Lingham must have felt Morton’s eyes upon him, for he looked up at him from over the note.

‘I hope it is not bad news?’ Morton said. ‘My uncle is well, I trust? I recognise his seal,’ he added, nodding at the letter.

Mr Lingham put the note on his desk and covered it with his hand. His eyes narrowed slightly, as though he were considering something. ‘It is not good news,’ he said slowly, still watching Morton’s face. ‘It’s from Lord Lansdowne’s physician.’

‘Oh, mercy!’ cried Morton, putting a hand to his chest. ‘Don’t say my uncle is ill?’ He forced himself to sound anxious rather than excited. ‘Do not tell me he is *dead*?’

‘He is not dead.’

‘Oh.’ He forced himself to look relieved.

‘But he is in decline.’

‘Oh.’ He forced himself not to look hopeful.

‘And his decline has been hastened by some bad news.’

‘Bad news?’

‘His butler, his longstanding servant of many decades, has been arrested.’

‘He has?’ He forced a surprised expression. ‘On what charge? No, don’t tell me.’ He held up a hand. ‘He was caught *pilfering*. I told you it was so. What was it this time? A crate of Uncle’s best Burgundy?’

‘It was something of value from a neighbouring house.’

Mr Lingham was watching Morton very carefully, but Morton rose to the occasion admirably. He arranged a look of puzzlement. ‘Why should he be at a neighbouring house?’ He shook his head sadly. ‘I knew that sneaking butler would show his true colours one day. Poor uncle. Perhaps he will now realise who the *real* deceiver is. Exactly how ill is he?’

The lawyer glanced at the note. ‘His physician thinks he may only

have a week, two at best.'

Morton stood up. There was no reason to waste any more time in this dismal office. He had three pieces of valuable information: he knew that Canning had been arrested, and his name discredited. This was a satisfying piece of revenge and would put himself back in a good light. His uncle could not fully believe his butler's word over his nephew's with regard to the French imposter, not when the butler was proved to be a crook. Secondly, he had learned that his uncle was in decline. He forced a sober face as he considered this piece of delightful news. And thirdly, there was no way the will could have been altered since he had last seen his uncle, for the lawyer had not been to Eastersham. Therefore, Morton concluded, all he now had to do was make sure that the French usurper did not make himself known before Lord Lansdowne died.

'By the by,' he said, pausing. 'What was the name of the Frenchman my cousin Elizabeth ran off with? Was it something like Court?'

'De Courtenay,' said Mr Lingham. 'Why do you ask? Have you heard of someone of that name?'

'Have you?'

The lawyer did not answer.

'No matter. Good day to you.'

He marched out of the office, past the clerk, down the stairs, brandished his cane and bellowed threats in order to part the crowd of vagrants, all the while formulating his next plan. He would need that rogue Lemmy to do another job for him. It was going to cost. But it would be worth every penny.

'IT'S GOING TO COST,' said Lemmy.

'How much?'

Lemmy whistled through his teeth. 'Kidnappin' is a capital offence, Mister B. You is asking a lot. A lot more than a bit o' house breakin'.'

'It's only for a week or so,' snapped Morton. 'Can you do it, or not?'

Lemmy sipped his drink with maddening slowness. Morton was desperate to get this transaction over with. He was worried someone might recognise him in this den of criminals and lowlifes. He did not belong here. He was supposed to be in Drury Lane, watching *Much Ado* with Miss Tandy.

'Four hundred,' said Lemmy at last.

'Guineas, I suppose?' said Morton bitterly. He had half expected the price to be double what he had paid for the first job.

‘If you say so, guv, guineas it is.’

Morton scowled at him, unsure whether the man was mocking him or if he had just unwittingly overpaid him.

‘I want it done quickly. How soon can you take him?’

‘I’ll need to set up the lay, first,’ said Lemmy. ‘A week you say?’

‘Two at most.’

Another whistle through the teeth. ‘The price is four hundred a week, Mister B.’

‘You thieving scoundrel,’ muttered Morton, his temper flaring. He leaned forward, lifting his cane a few inches as though to strike the impudence from the face before him. Before he knew what had happened, his little finger was wrenched back, and by the time he had completed a yelp of pain, his cane was in Lemmy’s hands.

‘Watch it, Mister B,’ said Lemmy, his eyes hard. He poked Morton in the chest with the brass knob on the end of the cane. Lemmy’s face cleared and he winked as he tossed the cane back. Morton failed to catch it and had to scrabble on the filthy floor of the inn for it.

‘So, ‘ave we a gentleman’s agreement? Shall we step into the private parlour and have a cosy chat with the brag? Then we can finalise the details of our bit o’ business. Step this way, Mister B.’

LAURA WAS ENJOYING THE PLAY, her pleasure only dimmed by the heavy sighs from Ralph, who sat next to Tiffany.

‘Oh, for pity’s sake, Ralph,’ whispered Tiffany halfway through the third act, ‘if you resent being here that much, then go off to wherever it is you want to be. Laura and I will do very well without you. You sigh worse than any actress. You’ll be fainting or bursting into tears next.’

‘Can’t,’ said Ralph sulkily. ‘Not leaving you without an escort. Ma would rip my ears off.’

‘It’s not my fault that Mr Butternock did not keep his word, but I shall have heaps of callers in the interval. Any one of them will squire us if I ask. Go on. I cannot bear any more of your maudlin mopes. What is the matter with you?’

‘Nothing.’ Ralph pouted. ‘Nothing that your soft little noodle brain would understand, anyhow.’

‘You’re not in love, are you?’

Ralph snorted.

‘You’re not in debt, are you?’

Ralph suddenly became very interested in what was happening on the stage below.

‘You *are*. Oh, Ralph, *you* are the soft little noodle-brain – how

could you? After all that Papa said.

‘Keep your voice down.’ Ralph shifted about on his chair.

‘How much?’

‘How much, what?’

‘Don’t be evasive. How much do you owe this time?’

Ralph shrugged and continue to find Mrs Brunton’s performance fascinating.

‘I might be able to help, Ralph.’

Ralph swung his opera glass upon his sister.

‘I still have nearly a hundred pounds of my allowance left. Would that cover it?’

Ralph dropped his eye glass and sighed heavily again. ‘Fraid not, old girl. But, dash it, Tiff, good of you to offer.’

‘Is it very much more than a hundred?’ Tiffany enquired, talking gently now, as though coaxing a timid horse or dog to trust her. ‘I could ask Mama for some more. She would give me another fifty without even asking what I wanted it for.’

Ralph shook his head and let his chin droop to his chest.

‘How much, Ralph?’ Tiffany leaned close to her brother that he might tell her confidentially in her ear.

Ralph shrugged and whispered something.

‘*Eight hundred!*’

Tiffany’s little shriek was made during a pause in the speech from the stage. Laura jumped, and the Melburys in the box to the left and the Raffington party in the box to their right all craned their necks to look over at them, swinging their opera glasses in their direction.

‘*In one night?*’ Tiffany said, lowering her voice to a shrill whisper as Ralph made flapping gestures with his hand to motion her to be quiet.

Tiffany was too upset to notice the door to the box opening stealthily, but Laura noticed, and put a hand on Tiffany’s arm to gain her attention. ‘Mr Butternock is here,’ she whispered.

‘So sorry I am late, Miss Tandy,’ said Mr Butternock, bowing clumsily. ‘Unforeseen and urgent family business.’

Ralph jumped to his feet, looking unusually glad to see Mr Butternock. ‘Won’t need me now,’ he murmured, ‘so I’ll be off. Night.’

‘Your brother is in a hurry,’ Mr Butternock commented as Ralph rushed past him with barely a nod.

‘Yes,’ said Tiffany sadly, turning her head of fair ringlets to watch Ralph go.

Mr Butternock took Ralph’s vacated seat. Laura watched him for a few moments, noting the high colour in his face and the bright, furtive look in his eye. He looked like a man who had just committed a crime, thought Laura. He had a mix of guilt and excitement emanating from him, as though he done some nefarious act and got away with it. She

noted the flush of success in his drawn cheeks, the nervous twitching of his hands as he fiddled with his cravat and cuffs. He fidgeted about, pulling out a large silk handkerchief and dabbing at his forehead.

Laura turned all her attention back to the performance, having no wish to watch Mr Butternock. But she was sorry about Ralph. Very sorry indeed. She knew the misery of debt problems and the shattering effect they had on a family. But the Tandys were very wealthy. Mr Tandy would no doubt give Ralph “a roasting”, as Ralph would say, but he would bail out his wayward son once again. For all Mr Tandy’s bluster and thunder, he would not abandon his only son and heir. Pity the poor sons who have no fathers to bail them out, was her gloomy thought, and the actors on the stage grew dim as her thoughts took a sad turn.

‘Mr Butternock, this is really *not* the time and place.’ Tiffany’s voice drew Laura out of her thoughts.

‘I know, Miss Tandy, forgive me. But I know what will happen as soon as the interval comes – that Partington fellow will steal all your attention from me. He always does.’

Laura made a polite little cough to indicate that she could hear the couple. Mr Butternock did lower his voice, but not low enough, for Laura could still hear his excited whisper. She tried to focus on the stage but could not help overhearing.

‘Only say I might speak to your father, Miss Tandy. That is all I ask.’

‘If you can find him, you may speak to him all you choose, Mr Butternock.’

‘Can you not send word to him to call? Surely you understand my intentions, Miss Tandy? Surely you can be in no doubt?’

‘A lady never presumes, Mr Butternock. Until the words have been spoken she can know nothing of such things.’

Mr Butternock began to speak, but Tiffany forestalled him. ‘And a gentleman does not take the liberty of speaking until he has gained permission from a lady’s father. And when he does speak, he does not do so in a public theatre. He requests a private audience.’

‘Are we not alone?’ Mr Butternock said petulantly.

‘Miss Dymond is with us.’

Laura did not need to see the dismissive look on Mr Butternock’s face to know that he did not consider her as a person of consequence. The horrible man must think that servants, even companions, were not real people. How could Tiffany even entertain a proposal from such a man?

‘Please send word to your father to call, Miss Tandy,’ begged Mr Butternock. ‘I would go north and call on him directly if it were not for my family troubles, which must take me south at any hour.’

Miss Tandy fanned herself slowly and silently.

‘I have had the most remarkable news, Miss Tandy. My uncle has but a week, two at most left.’

Laura winced. How could the man call his uncle’s approaching death *remarkable* news? Clearly Tiffany thought the same thing, for Laura heard her say, ‘Remarkable? What an odd choice of word for so sad an event.’

‘Did I say remarkable? The grief has addled my wits, Miss Tandy. Or perhaps it is my strong and violent feelings in another regard that has addled me. I meant *reprehensible*. Poor uncle. Poor Lord Lansdowne.’

Laura closed her eyes momentarily to keep from rolling them in an unbecoming expression. Did the vulgar man have to keep dropping hints of his uncle’s title to remind Tiffany that he was to be the new Lord Lansdowne? But the reminder seemed to work, for Tiffany said in a resigned voice, ‘I shall ask Mama to send word to my father to call directly.’

If Mr Butternock were about to gush his thanks, and perhaps press Miss Tandy’s hand in a show of mutual understanding, he was interrupted by the third act coming to a close, and the box door being flung aside by Crispin Partington. The poor would-be lover must have been poised outside, waiting for the curtain to come down. Mr Butternock stiffened at his rival’s entrance and pasted a smug, triumphant look on his face, and dared to move his chair even closer to Tiffany in a possessive gesture. Mr Partington’s mild, honest face looked between Tiffany and Mr Butternock, sizing up the scene before him. He glanced at Laura with a question in his eyes, and Laura could only give a small smile and shrug of apology. Poor Mr Partington. If only he had not a dissolute father, he could have won Tiffany easily from Mr Butternock, for a future earl trounced a future baron any day.



‘WHAT is the matter with everyone this morning?’ Mrs Tandy took up her fish knife, ready to eat her kippers. ‘I’ve never seen such a row of mardy faces.’

Henry made an effort to rouse himself from the depressed thought that this might be the last breakfast he ever had in the Tandy house. He forced one of his charming smiles at Mrs Tandy and began to nibble at his buttered roll. Ralph sat slumped in his chair, nursing a mug of small beer. His plate of sausage and kidneys was piled high, but untouched. ‘Sorry, Mama,’ said Tiffany, pushing her eggs about her plate.

‘I think your eggs are scrambled enough, dear,’ Laura said gently. Tiffany put her fork down.

‘Are you worried about Papa calling today?’ said Mrs Tandy, lifting a piece of fish bone and putting it on the edge of her plate.

‘No,’ said Tiffany unconvincingly. Ralph jumped at the mention of his father, shot a worried look at Henry, then fell back into musing into his beer.

‘You don’t have to marry him,’ said Mrs Tandy. Boots, an adopted stray cat, and the latest addition to the Tandy household, sauntered into the breakfast room, tail high. He leapt onto the chair beside Mrs Tandy and sniffed the air.

‘He’s the best I can get,’ said Tiffany.

‘But do you like him, dear?’

‘Not much. But I shall like being Lady Lansdowne with a country estate and a mansion in Mayfair.’

‘Mr Butternock doesn’t have a mansion in Mayfair. He takes lodgings,’ her mother reminded her.

‘Not yet. But he will. And you can visit me as often as you choose, Mama.’

‘Has he agreed to this?’ Laura asked.

Tiffany shrugged her dainty shoulders. ‘He said I should have things just as I like them.’ Her expression faltered. ‘At least, I think he did. Perhaps it was I who said I should have things just as I like them, and he did not say I could not.’

‘Man’s a humbug,’ said Ralph, speaking for the first time.

‘At least he’s a *solvent* humbug,’ retorted Tiffany.

Ralph snorted. ‘Not likely. I’ve been round all the tailors and outfitters in London, dropped his name a few times. He’s reckoned a bad apple. Don’t settle his bills.’

Tiffany bristled. 'That's because people in society always settle their bills at the end of the season. It's very aristocratic.'

'It's very thoughtless,' said Mrs Tandy, sharing a piece of kipper with the cat. 'Mr Tandy don't think much of customers who don't settle up without being chased. What did you mean by *solvent*, my pet?'

Tiffany did not reply. She glanced at Ralph, daring him to explain his state of affairs, but Ralph drained his cup and reached for the jug. 'Dash it, the beer's all gone. Fetch another jug, Symes,' he called to the footman standing by the sideboard.

'What does Tiffany mean by *solvent*?' Mrs Tandy asked Laura, seeing that she would get no answer from her children who were scowling at one another across the table.

Laura shifted on her chair, uncomfortable at being put on the spot. 'I...am sure I do not know.' She blushed furiously at the lie.

'Do you know, Mr Brown?'

'It is not a word I am familiar with,' said Henry obtusely, sharing a look of sympathy with Laura at this awkwardness.

'Seems no one wants to tell me,' said Mrs Tandy. 'That's the last of it, Boots. Now on your way. You're getting plump.' Symes returned with the beer just as a firm knocking sounded from the front door.

Everyone bar Mrs Tandy jumped. 'La!' she exclaimed. 'What a lot of jack-in-a-boxes you are. It can't be Mr Tandy, for he could not get here so quick in the day. He don't have a flying carriage, you know.'

The anxious breakfasters relaxed again, realising the truth of Mrs Tandy's words. Symes had disappeared from the room to get the door. He soon returned to announce, 'Mr Tandy, ma'am.'

Ralph leapt up, looking futilely for a means of escape. There was none, for there was only one door into the breakfast room, and he could not make it down the hall and up the stairs without his father seeing him. Already the quick step of Mr Tandy could be heard.

Henry stood up also, out of respect for the master of the house's entrance. He made a bow of greeting to Mr Tandy, then murmured his excuses, saying he had work to attend to. Laura watched him leave.

'My love!' cried Mrs Tandy. 'What a pleasant surprise. But how did you get here so early?'

Mr Tandy bowed and kissed his wife's hand. 'Reached Hatfield yesterday evening. Put up overnight, left at dawn.'

'Sit down, my love. We have kippers, your favourite.'

Mr Tandy pulled a face. 'Hate the things.' He made a growl of surprise as he almost sat on Boots. 'There's a mangy cat at the table!' he exclaimed. 'What is this, a zoological garden?'

Mrs Tandy laughed as though he had made a good joke.

'Should you like a fresh pot of coffee, Papa?' Tiffany asked sweetly.

‘Tea,’ said Mr Tandy, looking from face to face with his sharp eyes. ‘Looking peaky, Tiff. Not eating your breakfast. What’s it about? Not in love, are you?’

‘No,’ said Tiffany simply.

‘So where’s this Butternock fellow who wants to speak with me? Think highly of him, do you?’

‘He’s to inherit a barony very soon,’ was Tiffany’s reply.

‘I know. Had him checked out by the lawyers.’

‘Papa, you’re very suspicious.’

‘Not going to let any riff raff marry my daughter.’

‘What did you find out about him?’ Mrs Tandy asked.

‘Been living on his expectations this past year. Racked up trade bills. Nothing out of the ordinary. Got a tidy inheritance. Odd story about another heir. This Butternock only inherits if the first heir don’t show up before the uncle dies.’

‘Another heir?’ Tiffany’s eyebrows lifted. ‘Mr Butternock never mentioned that.’

‘Fellow was considered dead but supposedly been seen recently.’

Tiffany’s eyebrows lifted higher.

‘Frenchman, I think.’

‘Oh!’ Tiffany turned to Laura. ‘Could it be that advertisement we read? There was a reward offered for news of a young Frenchman, a missing heir.’

‘Perhaps it is,’ said Laura. ‘I meant to ask Mr Brown if he had met other young Frenchmen in the city.’

‘We shall ask him this very day,’ said Tiffany, her eyes brightening. ‘Did you see the advertisement, Ralph?’

‘What? My advertisement? How did you know it was mine?’

Tiffany laughed. ‘Ralph, you have not been listening to a word. Why should an advertisement about a missing heir be yours?’

‘Was not listening,’ admitted Ralph. ‘Got things on my mind. Must go.’ He stood up. ‘Please excuse me, Father. I...er...have an appointment to attend to.’

His father eyed him closely. ‘You’re jittery, Ralph.’

‘Me? No.’ Ralph knocked his chair over as he turned from the table. He scrambled to pick it up. Symes rushed to assist him, but a fierce knocking at the door in the hall distracted him.

‘Who in the blazes is that at this time of the morning?’ said Mr Tandy.

Tiffany paled, and Laura squeezed her hand, knowing that Tiffany was anxious over it being Mr Butternock, come to ask for Mr Tandy’s permission to pay his addresses.

There came the sound of raised voices. Symes had dropped his footman’s voice and was shouting in his native Cockney. ‘Stow yer

whids or you'll get one in the breadbasket, you ain't comin' in 'ere, there ain't no one at 'ome! *Mister Grouse!*

Doors flung open and footsteps hurried along hallways and down stairs, and the butler's deep voice joined in with Symes's protests. A volley of barks and growls added to the cacophony, indicating that Floss had escaped from the servants' hall and was defending his mistress's house along with the butler and head footman.

'What the blazes is going on!' bellowed Mr Tandy, pushing his chair back and marching out to see for himself.

'La!' said Mrs Tandy. 'Sounds like a regular rumpus! Ralph, go along with your father.'

But Ralph stood statue-like and pale. He was listening hard to the voices carrying down the hall and through the open door of the breakfast room. Mr Tandy's voice was the loudest, and was heard to roar out, 'Shut that dog up! What do you mean by *loans?*'

Ralph whimpered. Laura felt a rush of pity for him, guessing what was happening.

'*Ralph!*' Called Mr Tandy. '*Get down here!*'

'La!' cried Mrs Tandy. 'What is going on?'

'It's all up now,' said Ralph. Then he straightened up and walked woodenly out of the room like a man walking to his execution.

Mrs Tandy, Tiffany and Laura all scrambled to hurry after him. 'Oh Laura,' whispered Tiffany, reaching for Laura's arm for support. 'Poor Ralphie. He's such a noodle but I don't want him sent off to fight the French.'

At the entrance to the Tandy house stood two rough, burly men, and a third man dressed in black, waving pieces of paper. The burly fellows had managed to gain a step across the threshold, forcing the door to remain open, while Mr Grouse was doing his utmost to force it shut again. Symes was restraining the feisty Floss. Judging by the torn trouser leg of the man with the paperwork, Floss had done her best to see off the strangers.

The upstairs maids, who had been making up beds, were peeping over the bannisters to see what was going on. Mr Brown came running lightly down the stairs.

'Mr Tandy, whatever is the matter?' Mrs Tandy cried, scurrying forward, the train of her house robe trailing along the floor.

'Duns, Mrs Tandy,' said her husband, his eyes glittering.

'Duns? For who? Oh, not for...?' Her voice faltered. She looked at her son, whose face was as pale as the marble tiles beneath their feet. 'Oh, Ralph, not again? How much?' Mrs Tandy wanted to know.

'Twelve hundred,' said her husband.

'Twelve?' whispered Tiffany, standing beside her brother in a show of support. 'I thought you said eight?'

‘Interest,’ said Ralph gloomily.

Mrs Tandy’s face cleared. ‘Well, that can be settled directly,’ she said brightly. ‘Why don’t you pay them and send them away, Mr Tandy?’

‘Because,’ said Mr Tandy slowly, his eyes boring into Ralph, ‘if I do, they will be back again next time.’

‘There won’t be a next time, sir,’ said Ralph in a shaky voice.

‘Chop the head off a weed and it sprouts up twice as strong,’ said Mr Tandy. ‘Only way to get rid of it is to pull it up by its roots and throw it on the bonfire.’

‘Mr Tandy, what are you saying?’ cried his wife.

‘I’m saying, Mrs Tandy, that I will not pay this debt, for if I do, there will be another twice as big next time.’

‘But...Father!’ said Ralph, regaining some animation. ‘If you don’t pay it, I will...’

‘Go to debtors’ prison,’ said Mr Tandy grimly. ‘Take him away. You’ll get no money from me.’

There was a renewal of uproar at these words. Mrs Tandy shrieked, Ralph yelled, Tiffany squealed, Floss barked, and Ralph was seized by the burly debt collectors and dragged from the house. Tiffany swooned and was caught by Mr Brown. Mrs Tandy swooned and was caught by Grouse. Symes rushed for brandy and Laura rushed for Mrs Tandy’s sedating drops and smelling salts.

Laura followed Mr Brown as he carried Tiffany to the nearest sofa in the front parlour and laid her down. Mrs Tandy was carefully borne to a neighbouring sofa and laid down by her devoted butler. Laura winced as she watched Mr Brown gently lifting Tiffany’s head, begging Laura to give Miss Tandy a sip of wine, then lifting a stray ringlet from Tiffany’s cheek as though he were touching something fragile and precious. Tiffany’s eyelids fluttered open and rested upon Mr Brown’s face, which hovered over hers. Tiffany smiled weakly, and Mr Brown smiled tenderly back. Laura tried to swallow down the lump in her throat.

‘Ralphie?’ whispered Tiffany. ‘Papa did not let him be taken, did he?’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Mr Brown. ‘But he did.’ Tiffany gave a sob. Mr Brown bent his head lower, and for one heart-stopping moment Laura thought he was going to kiss her, but he only bent to whisper something in Tiffany’s ear. ‘Some wine, Miss Dymond,’ said Mr Brown.

Laura poured a glass and held it out with a shaky hand.

‘Some calming drops,’ begged Tiffany, so Laura handed Mr Brown the little bottle. ‘Only one drop,’ she advised. ‘Or it will put her to sleep.’

The sedating wine was gently administered and Tiffany lay back

against a cushion, looking gratefully at Mr Brown, who returned her look with one of concern.

'You, Brown!' boomed the voice of Mr Tandy. Laura jumped, spilling the decanter of wine she held. Mr Brown lowered Tiffany's head, got to his feet and turned to face Mr Tandy. Laura noticed how his jaw tightened and his shoulders braced, as though he expected to receive a blow of words.

'Out of my house. You're dismissed!'

'Papa!' wailed Tiffany, trying to sit up.

'Mr Tandy, no!' protested Mrs Tandy from the other sofa. She waved her handkerchief in protest. 'It's not of Mr Brown's doing!'

'I charged him to keep your wayward son out of mischief,' said Mr Tandy. 'And he failed.'

There were more protests and tears, but Mr Brown made a short bow and walked out of the room and out of Laura's life without so much as a backward glance. She wanted to run after him, catch hold of him – he could not leave like this! But Tiffany clung to her arm.

Amid the cacophony of tears and raised voices, another caller knocked at the door, and Symes came in to announce that 'Mr Butternock has come to speak with Mr Tandy.'

This set Tiffany off again. 'I cannot see anyone!' she cried. 'Tell him to go away!'

'Send him to the library,' Mr Tandy said, marching from the room.

'I cannot see that man,' wailed Tiffany. 'I *won't* see him. Poor Ralphie! Oh, Laura! Oh, Mama!'

'There, there,' soothed Laura. 'I'm sure your father would not expect you to receive Mr Butternock today.'

'You don't know Papa,' sobbed Tiffany. 'He will want to get it all tied up in one morning so he can go back to his nasty mills and offices.'

'What did Mr Brown say to you?' Laura had to know.

'He said...' stammered Tiffany between the beginning of a bout of hiccups, always a side effect of *Dr Barnes' Tranquillising Tincture*. 'He said he would go...*hic*...to Ralphie at the Marshal...*hic*...sea.'

'The Marshalsea...' Laura slumped against the back of the sofa, forgetting that the sofa had no back, and tumbled to the floor.

'Laura's fainted!' cried Tiffany, and the maid, attending to Mrs Tandy, rushed to Laura's side.

'I am fine,' Laura assured her, pushing the bottle of salts away and scrambling back to her seat.

'How could Papa...*hic*...send him to so...*hic*...dreadful a place?' wailed Tiffany.

'What will they do to him?' moaned Mrs Tandy. 'It will kill him! It will be worse than the army! They will starve him and beat him and

put him in irons—'

'It is not so bad as that, Mrs Tandy,' said Laura weakly. 'If money is supplied, Master Tandy will be provided for.'

'Then money must be sent! Tell Mr Brown he must take plenty of money! Symes, fetch Mr Brown!'

'He's gone, ma'am,' said Symes. 'Mr Tandy says as he was to go directly, and so he did.'

'Then you must go after him! You must take money for poor Ralph! Laura – there's a purse in the writing desk, the key is in the lock.'

Laura got up on shaky legs to obey Mrs Tandy's wishes, handing the pouch of coins to the footman, who sped off to catch Mr Brown up. *Frederick*, she thought desperately. She should have had the afternoon off today to visit him. Perhaps Ralph would fare better than Frederick. Ralph might be given one of the rooms reserved for the well-connected prisoners; the ones who had family or friends to pay for the comforts of proper meals and a bed and more liberty. Laura gave every penny she earned to pay for Frederick's meagre meals and the room he shared with several other men. It was all she could afford after paying a little of his debt each month. 'I must see him,' she murmured, thinking of poor Frederick going hungry without her wages and her basket of food.

'Don't leave me,' sobbed Tiffany. 'Let...*hic*...Mr Brown see him. He promised he would. Don't leave me to face Mr...*hic*...Butternock alone.'



SYMES RETURNED, reporting to Mrs Tandy that he had successfully caught up with Mr Brown and handed over the bag of guineas to pay for Master Tandy's comfort. He had given Mr Brown the message to return to them that night. He would not be turned out without his wages and belongings, and Mrs Tandy was anxious for news of Ralph.

'La, what a morning!' wailed Mrs Tandy, as Symes left the room. 'It could not get any worse.' And then Grouse came in to announce that Mr Tandy requested Miss Tandy to wait on him and Mr Butternock in the library.

'It *has* gotten worse,' said Tiffany, looking as wan and fragile as a storybook damsel in distress. Her speech was slower than usual, though her hiccups had abated. 'I am not in the mood for a proposal, and I shall tell him so. I don't care if Papa is angry with me, I won't accept a proposal on such a day.'

'Tell him to come back another day!' agreed her mother. 'I don't much care for him anyhow. I am sure I saw him try to kick Boots.'

'Come with me, Laura,' begged Tiffany.

Laura linked her arm with Tiffany's, supporting her as they walked in funereal slowness down the hall. But they had only taken a step inside the library when Mr Tandy shouted, 'Out, Miss Dymond! We shall leave the young people. Five minutes, Mr Butternock.' Laura was ushered out again, casting a last look over her shoulder at Tiffany, who looked back with a white face.

Laura paced up and down the hallway, checking the grandfather clock each time she passed it to make sure that Mr Butternock got no more than his five minutes. Mr Tandy had joined Mrs Tandy in the parlour, and their voices rose and fell. Laura covered her ears, not wanting to hear their conversation. She paced, and watched the clock, and when seven and a half minutes had passed, the library door opened and Mr Butternock and Tiffany appeared.

Mr Butternock looked triumphant. Tiffany looked resigned. Mr Butternock would have walked straight past Laura, but Tiffany stopped and said sadly, 'Oh, Laura, I must be married.'

'Come along, Theodosia, my dear,' said Mr Butternock, tugging Tiffany away. 'Your father must hear the good news first, not the servants.'

WHILE MORTON BUTTERNOCK drank champagne at Mr Tandy's house to celebrate his betrothal to Miss Tandy, his much-abused manservant, Cyril Coffey, was hurrying down Serle Street after Mr Lingham. He could not gain entry to Mr Lingham's office; a crowd of people outside blocked the way, and no one was permitted to enter without an appointment. But he had been in luck, for he had wandered about the building where Mr Lingham's office was situated, looking for another entrance, and had seen Mr Lingham himself coming out, tugging his beaver hat into place. Cyril Coffey recognised the lawyer, having seen him twice at Eastersham.

'Mr Lingham! Been tryin' to see you all mornin'!' he said, jogging lopsidedly to catch the lawyer up.

'Go away,' was the reply. 'I'm late for court.'

'But I know where that French feller you're looking for is.'

'You and every other man in London,' said Mr Lingham, marching on, swinging his cane so that Cyril could not get too close to him but had to lurch alongside him, almost in the road.

'But I've seen him, been following him. Mr Butternock had me on his trail.'

That got Mr Lingham's attention. He paused abruptly. 'Mr Butternock?'

Cyril nodded. 'He heard about the advertisement for the French fellow. Got an inkling it might be a valet fellow. Had me following him ever since.'

'Did he send you?'

Cyril shook his head vigorously. 'Would break my neck if he knew.'

'He knows the whereabouts of his cousin?'

Cyril nodded. 'Mr Brown. That's his name.'

'Mr Brown? That cannot be his real name. He's a Frenchman.'

Cyril shrugged. 'Got an accent.'

'Where is he?'

'Hanover Square. Works for the Tandys.'

'That Mr Brown! The one the society columns have dubbed *Beau Brown*?'

Cyril shrugged again. He did not read society columns.

Mr Lingham took a step closer, examining Cyril's face with a shrewd eye. 'Why are you telling me this? Is it for the reward money?'

'Yessir.'

'You have no loyalty to your master?'

'Not since I heard him telling the lawyer feller that he was goin' to sack every servant he had and get new ones when he's Lord Lansdowne.'

'What lawyer fellow?'

'Mr Tandy's lawyer feller. Came for a chat about marriage

settlements. Mr Tandy sent him. Master's going to propose to the Tandy chit. Gone there this morning to do it. Then they'll sign the papers.'

'And Mr Butternock has had you following this Mr Brown?'

Cyril nodded. 'Now I got to watch the Tandy house, make sure no one cuts in on him with the young lady.'

Mr Lingham narrowed his eyes and stared into the distance as though seeing scenarios playing out. 'Tell me, Mr—?'

'Coffey. Cyril Coffey.'

'Mr Coffey, tell me, did your master have anything to do with the arrest of the butler at his uncle's house?'

'Don't rightly know. But that butler was seen in town. The master was jumping over that. Would be like him to get revenge. They kicked him out, the staff at Eastersham.' Cyril giggled, showing crooked teeth. 'Wish I'd seen it.'

'But you don't know of any plan?'

Cyril shook his head. 'He did go off to the Hog an' Boar all wrapped up in his old cloak. I were told that's the place to go if you want someone for a lay. And there was some feller come round wanting money a few days ago. Master were in a plum pickle over him coming to the door. Rough feller.' Cyril glanced about him then leaned forward to confide, 'Master got some new papers with big numbers on 'em.'

'What do you mean?'

'Think they're loans, 'cause he put 'em in the same box as all his bills. Got a whopping pile of 'em now. London life is 'spensive.'

'If he is running up debt, he must be very keen to ensure he gets his inheritance,' mused Mr Lingham aloud.

Cyril nodded. 'Deadly keen.'

Mr Lingham gave him a sharp look. 'You say this Mr Brown is currently residing at the Tandy house?'

'Were there yesterday.'

Mr Lingham took out a large pocket watch and winced as he looked at it. 'I am late. But I thank you for this piece of information. If it proves correct, I shall ensure you receive the reward money.'

Cyril grinned, his mouth contorting as though his face was unused to smiling.

'Return to your master, Mr Coffey. Act as you would usually do. Give him no cause to suspicion you. If you learn of anything new regarding Mr Butternock's schemes, come and see me. I shall instruct my clerk to let you in directly.'

Mr Coffey touched his cap, bowed and thanked Mr Lingham, but the lawyer brushed his thanks aside and marched on, looking for a cab to hail.

‘WHY DID YOU ACCEPT HIM?’ was Laura’s first question when she could speak to Tiffany alone. Mr Tandy had spent the day ensconced in his library with his lawyer and Mr Butternock, drawing up a marriage settlement for Tiffany. Now and then Mr Butternock’s voice had been heard exclaiming, ‘Oh, I say!’ as though there were some conditions in the settlement that were not to his liking. And at other times Mr Tandy’s loud voice was heard bellowing out such things as, ‘No grandson of mine shall go anywhere except Eton and Cambridge!’

Finally Mr Butternock had come in to say an oily goodbye to the ladies, promising to call on the morrow, and Mr Tandy had thundered out of the house, calling for the carriage, without a word of where he was going.

Mrs Tandy, overwrought with the emotions of the day, had succumbed to her maid’s offer of a little brandy in her tea, and had dozed off on the couch. None of the ladies had touched any luncheon; they were too distressed to eat. Laura repeated her whispered question, ‘Why did you accept him, dear?’

‘Because,’ said Tiffany dully, ‘he promised that the minute he received his inheritance, which is thought to be very soon, he would pay all Ralphie’s debts, and he would let Ralph live with us if Papa banishes him from the house.’

‘Oh, Tiffany,’ mourned Laura. ‘He bribed you.’

‘What could I do? When I think of Ralph languishing in a dungeon.’

‘I don’t think it is quite as bad as that, dear.’ Laura’s thoughts flew to Frederick. At that very hour she would usually be walking about the dismal courtyard with him. She must get a message to him first thing in the morning, and get some money to him, or he would not get enough to eat. There was no chance of her getting away today.

Mrs Tandy gave an enormous snore and woke herself up. ‘Is Mr Brown come with any news?’ was her first thought.

‘No, ma’am,’ said Laura sadly.

Mrs Tandy groaned. There came a brisk rat-a-tat-tat at the door and Mrs Tandy lifted her head, saying eagerly, ‘Is that Mr Brown? Run and see, Laura, for I cannot bear the suspense.’

Laura did not need urging a second time. She hurried to the entrance hall where Grouse was telling a stranger that the lady of the house was not at home to anyone today, and he would give the lady of the house the gentleman’s card.

‘Tell me, my good fellow,’ said the stranger at the door. ‘Is there a man of the name of Mr Brown residing here?’

Grouse acknowledged that there was.

‘Is he at home?’

Grouse informed him he was not.

‘Is he expected home soon? It is regarding a matter of a most urgent nature.’

Grouse said he could not say when or if Mr Brown was returning home and was closing the door. Laura, anxious that the stranger should not be turned away until the matter of a most urgent nature was explained, called out, ‘Wait!’ She lifted the hem of her gown to hurry to the doorway in a most unladylike manner. ‘Wait! Don’t close the door, Mr Grouse!’

‘WHO WAS IT, LAURA?’ Mrs Tandy asked anxiously. ‘My dear, you look peculiar. What has happened? Who was at the door?’

Laura returned to the parlour, still reeling from what she had just heard. ‘There is a lawyer in the hall, ma’am, looking for Mr Brown. He says...’ here Laura faltered, looking at Tiffany, who, despite her distress, still looked as lovely as an angel. Laura could see it all – could see how the news she was about to break might change everything for Tiffany. If Tiffany only wanted a title to marry, why would she not exchange horrible Mr Butternock for handsome Mr Brown?

‘What does this lawyer say?’ Mrs Tandy pressed. ‘What is he to do with Mr Brown?’

‘It seems, ma’am, that Mr Brown is the true heir of a certain Lord Lansdowne, and this lawyer is trying to find him. In short, ma’am, Mr Brown is the very man we read about in that advertisement.’

‘The missing heir!’ exclaimed Tiffany. ‘But how astonishing!’

Laura nodded mutely.

‘But then he is—’

‘Mr Butternock’s second cousin. And his supplanter as his uncle’s heir.’

‘Send him up, Laura!’ said Mrs Tandy. ‘Let us hear it all!’



MR LINGHAM HAD to repeat the story of how Mr Brown was really the long-lost grandson of Lord Lansdowne several times. Mrs Tandy's excitement over this surprising turn of events helped distract her from the anxiety over Ralph, and she called in the servants to hear the remarkable tale. Lottie, the little housemaid, had listened wide-eyed. 'A real live lord,' she said as she followed the housekeeper out of the room. 'An' I put his piller-cases on inside out.'

'You did what?' exclaimed the housekeeper, turning pink with indignation.

'I put 'em right again',' said Lottie anxiously. 'He didn't mind none. He laughed. Said he liked 'em that way round, 'cause then them frilly lace bits on the end didn't tickle his cheek.'

'I'll tickle your cheek, missy,' hissed the housekeeper. 'With the back of my hand.' Lottie shrank back, and the housekeeper softened her tone. 'Don't let it happen again.'

'No, Missus Sedgemoor,' Lottie promised. Her eyes brightened again. 'A *real* lord!'

The afternoon wore on, and the servants resumed their work, but Mr Brown did not appear. Symes had to repeat his account of catching Mr Brown up at the corner of the square. Mr Brown had refused the money at first until he understood it was for Master Tandy. He'd been quiet, as though he was not surprised at what had happened. He'd promised he would bring word back to Mrs Tandy after he had seen Master Tandy; he'd said he would be glad to do this last kindness.

'There,' said Mrs Tandy, 'he said he would do this last kindness to me. So, he has *not* run off with the money.'

'Of course he has not,' agreed Laura warmly. 'He would never do such a thing.'

'He might see the money as his rightful wages,' suggested Mr Lingham, who was weary of the hours of waiting in Mrs Tandy's parlour, and feeling jittery from too much tea. Mrs Tandy made her tea very strong. 'Are you sure you can think of nowhere he might go? Any connections he had in London?'

The ladies shook their heads. Symes, when asked, suggested that Mr Brown had been fond of calling in at a certain coffee-house near the Strand run by a Frenchman.

'He would hardly spend the whole day in a coffee-house with a bag of gold in his pocket,' said Mr Lingham. 'It is more likely that he went to one of the society families. I understand he was fêted by persons of

rank?’

‘They were always trying to poach him from us,’ said Mrs Tandy proudly. ‘But he was loyal to us. Dear Mr Brown.’

‘Dear Mr Brown,’ murmured Tiffany. ‘Such genius for clothes. Such taste.’ She sighed. ‘What shall we do without him?’

‘Perhaps I might look at his belongings,’ said Mr Lingham. ‘There may be some clue.’

‘I will show you his room,’ said Laura when Mrs Tandy had given her consent. Laura led the way upstairs, pushing open the door to Mr Brown’s bedroom.

All his clothes were still in the press, his sewing box sat on the scalloped-edge table, his shaving kit and comb and eau de lavande were neatly arranged on his dressing table. It gave Laura a pang to see his personal things. While the lawyer searched through the writing desk for papers, Laura moved to the dressing table and obeyed an impulse to lift the stopper on the scent bottle and inhale it. How many memories a scent could carry. She hurriedly put it away from her, feeling that she was being maudlin. The lawyer found a locket with the name *Elizabeth de Courtenay* inscribed on the back. He seemed to think this an important piece of evidence and put it carefully back in the desk.

HENRY FELT a kind of numbness as he left the Tandy’s house in Hanover Square. He had known this day would come when his brief sojourn as part of the family would end. It should not feel quite like the end of the world, for he had made new connections among other wealthy members of the ton. He’d had offers of employment, as well as more salacious offers, but he had no intention of being set up as anyone’s *cicisbeo*.

He was not quite destitute, so long as Mr Tandy paid him the wages due to him, and yet he felt as though he had lost everything all over again.

There was no time for dwelling on feelings. He must focus on the task at hand: he would ensure that Ralph was as comfortable as his mother’s gold could make him, and try to cheer Ralph’s spirits. After all, it was not likely that Mr Tandy would leave his son languishing in debtor’s jail for long. Or would he? Henry did not know Mr Tandy’s character well enough to know for certain. Would Mr Tandy even pay over his own wages? Or was he as poor as when he had first arrived at Hanover Square?

As he neared the Thames, he thought back to the last time he had walked this route. He thought of Miss Dymond’s slim figure hurrying

along ahead, disappearing through the black gates of the Marshalsea prison. Would he learn something of who it was she had visited that day? Did he want to know? Would it make any difference, seeing as their paths were now to be separated? The feeling of loss welled up again, and he quenched it down by turning his thoughts to other things. He needed all his wits about him to decide what he would do next. His survival depended upon it.

He was later to think that it was ironic that while absorbed in telling himself that he needed his wits to survive, he was neglecting to pay attention to his immediate surroundings. Had he been alert, he might have seen the trap he was about to walk into.

A carriage trundled close behind him as he walked along. He was dimly aware of it, hearing the wheels and the snort of the horses, but he paid it no attention, not considering that it was odd to be so closely followed by a carriage since he had left Hanover Square. The second odd occurrence that should have roused his suspicion, had he not been busy in giving himself a talking to, was the shifty look of the thin, angular man who appeared out of nowhere, drawing alongside him and saying, 'Scuse me, sir, but are you Mr Brown who works for the Tandy family?'

Henry was too surprised to say anything other than, 'Yes. Who is asking?'

'Then would you just step this way, Mr Brown. There's a carriage been sent special for you.'

'A carriage? From Mrs Tandy?'

He considered a moment too late that it was odd that Mrs Tandy would send a shabby hired carriage for him. He also considered a moment too late that the carriage, which the thin man with the sharp features ushered him towards, was the same vehicle which had been following him for the past half a mile.

'Just so, sir. If you'd step inside.'

Henry took a seat in the dark interior, wrinkled his nose at the smell of the rotting straw on the floor, saw the leering thug lurking in the corner of the carriage, and realised his mistake. The thin man shouted something and jumped inside. The door was slammed shut and the carriage took off at breakneck speed, sending the carriage rocking and jolting along.

Henry darted at the door to yank it open and leap out, but it was locked.

'Easy, guv,' said the thin man.

'Who are you?' demanded Henry. His senses sharpened now. He assessed the boarded-up carriage window; he might be able to kick it out, but he would need to disable these abductors of his first. As if anticipating this thought, the burly man made a show of flexing his

massive fists to show off the wicked looking knuckle dusters his fingers bore.

‘What do you want?’ Henry forced himself to sound angry, rather than scared, though his heart was hammering.

‘Just goin’ for a little ride, guv. No harm will come if you just settle back.’

‘Who are you, and what do you want?’ Henry repeated. There was no answer. ‘Did Mr Tandy send you?’ Surely Mr Tandy was not so villainous? But then, a man who would let his son go to jail and pressure his daughter into a marriage merely for social advancement could well be a villain. Neither man answered him. The burly creature made little growls now and then as though to suggest that he had dangerous animal instincts, and the thin man sat very still, his dark clothing melding his form against the black leather of the squabs.

Henry racked his mind for reasons why anyone would want to have him abducted from the streets. Surely he had no enemies other than one disgruntled ex-employer? Perhaps Mr Tandy had not made all of his substantial fortune by lawful trading and business; perhaps he was part of the shady underworld of organised crime, a man of ruthless and vengeful dealings? Perhaps kind Mrs Tandy knew nothing of her husband’s dealings. Families did have secrets from one another sometimes. Everyone seemed to have secrets, he thought ruefully. Even Miss Dymond had some secret lover, while he himself was living a life under an assumed name, hiding his past and true identity.

‘Is it money you want?’ Henry said. ‘Whatever Mr Tandy is paying you, I will pay more for my release.’ The burly man growled and the thin man remained unmoving and silent.

There was nothing he could say or do at present to get himself out of this trouble, so he concentrated instead on trying to count down the minutes that he might gauge how far they were travelling. He also concentrated on noting the turns the carriage made to try to discern the direction of this hideous journey, but his knowledge of the streets of London was not substantial; he only knew that they had been heading east, perhaps along the river, and now were turning north. It was only about four miles, he was sure of it, though it felt like four hundred. The carriage stopped. There were voices and someone scrambling down from the box. The door was unlocked and opened a few inches.

‘All clear,’ said a muffled voice.

‘If you would follow me, Mr Brown,’ said the thin man, springing into action, opening wide the carriage door. ‘Growler will see you safe to your ‘commodation.’

Henry deduced that Growler was the knuckle-cracker whose breath he could feel on the back of his neck as he gripped Henry’s arm and

clambered out of the carriage with him. He was marched swiftly through a door, getting a blurring impression of smoke-blackened bricks on the outside and damp, yellowed walls on the inside of the building.

‘Blind ‘im,’ said the thin man, and a smelly neckerchief was tied tightly around Henry’s eyes while Growler pinioned his arms. ‘Frisk ‘im,’ was the next order. Henry’s pockets were searched. Mrs Tandy’s money was taken with expressions of glee. ‘And what’s this?’ Growler demanded, pulling something out of Henry’s waistcoat pocket.

‘My medicine,’ said Henry, recalling that he had pocketed the little bottle of sedative after administering it to Miss Tandy. ‘Weak heart,’ he added, hoping that neither of his captors were literate enough to read the label.

‘Best let ‘im keep it,’ said the thin man.

This was a good sign, Henry thought. They didn’t want him dead. Or not yet.

Up a flight of stairs and another flight and into a room smelling of damp. Growler gave him a shove, and Henry stumbled into the room. The door was locked, leaving Henry alone, wrenching off his blindfold.

THE TANDY HOUSE knew by nightfall that something was very wrong. Mr Brown had not come home. All of Mrs Tandy’s footmen, her coachman and her grooms were sent out to search for the missing man. Messages were sent to Mr Tandy, but no one knew where he had gone that evening. Mr Lingham, weary of languishing in the parlour, set off himself to find out if Mr Brown had called at the debtor’s prison. Mrs Tandy wanted to go with him, having an idea that she might be able to see Ralph, but Mr Lingham was very firm in saying it was no place for a lady. He would bring back news directly. But the news he brought back was that Mr Brown had never reached the Marshalsea that day.

‘I cannot believe he has run off with that money. I will not believe it.’ Mrs Tandy adjusted the cologne-soaked cloth on her forehead as she lay on her sofa.

‘You may well be right, ma’am,’ said Mr Lingham. ‘Are you familiar with a Mr Morton Butternock?’

‘Certainly we are,’ said Mrs Tandy. ‘He is Tiffany’s betrothed.’

‘I see.’ Mr Lingham’s brows drew together in a frown. ‘I wonder...’

‘What is it, Mr Lingham?’ Laura begged. ‘What has Mr Butternock to do with this?’ She was desperate to know anything that might shed light on where Mr Brown had disappeared to. She remembered that

very first evening when they had met, when he had been attacked in a darkened street; what if he had been attacked again? What if some accident had befallen him? 'Oh, it is so dreadful not knowing what has happened!' she cried out, startling Mrs Tandy and Tiffany with her passion.

'Indeed it is,' Mrs Tandy agreed, lifting her head. 'And what of Mr Butternock being affianced to Tiffany? Why do you ask about him?'

'Surely you must see the irony, ma'am?'

'Mama does not understand irony,' said Tiffany. 'She has a very literal mind. Or so Mr Brown once said.'

'It was not a slur, ma'am,' Laura hurried to assure Mrs Tandy, who was looking wounded. 'It only means that you speak plainly.'

'To be sure I do,' said Mrs Tandy. 'Why should anyone wish to speak otherwise? Now speak plainly of what you mean, Mr Lingham.'

'What I mean, ma'am,' said Mr Lingham patiently, 'is that it is ironic that Mr Brown should come across the channel to find his mother's family, only to be turned away at the orders of Mr Butternock, if my suspicions are correct. Mr Brown then happens by chance to join the one household in all of England where the daughter of the house is affianced to Mr Brown's own cousin, the very man who wished to keep him from his family—'

'And from his inheritance,' finished Laura. 'Mr Butternock pins great hopes upon his inheritance,' she added slowly, watching Mrs Tandy and Tiffany for signs that they understood her meaning.

'Do you think he would go so far as to *remove* Mr Brown?' Tiffany said, her blue eyes widening.

Laura thought back to the night at the opera when Mr Butternock had come in looking flushed and guilty. 'Do you have evidence that it was Mr Butternock who ordered Mr Brown to be turned from his grandfather's house?' she asked.

'I have the word of a longstanding and loyal servant that he did so,' said Mr Lingham. 'But it is only a servant's word against Mr Butternock's at present.'

'But you suspect him.' It was not a question, for Laura could tell by the tone and manner of Mr Lingham that he did suspect Mr Butternock. 'What do you think he has done with Mr Brown?' She felt sick. Was Mr Butternock capable of something very bad? Would he hurt Mr Brown to gain the inheritance? Would he *murder* him?

'Miss Dymond, you look very pale,' said Mr Lingham. 'Take a little wine.'

'Take my salts,' said Tiffany, holding out the little crystal bottle that had done much service that day.

'Take my fan,' urged Mrs Tandy, 'Tis mortal warm in here tonight. I shall call for Symes to open the windows.' She tugged the bell rope

hanging within arm's reach of her sofa.

'There, do you feel a little better, Laura?' Mrs Tandy said, when Symes had opened the windows and refreshed everyone's glasses.

'I can never feel better until everyone is safely home,' said Laura, thinking of Mr Brown and Frederick and Ralph.

There was the sound of a bustle in the hall, and all three ladies sat up very straight. 'Who is it, Symes?' said Mrs Tandy eagerly. 'Is it Ralph?'

'It cannot be Ralph, Mama,' said Tiffany.

'Is it Mr Brown?' said Laura breathlessly.

'Where is Mrs Tandy?' boomed a voice from the hallway, and Mr Tandy strode in.

'Oh, Mr Tandy, 'tis you,' said Mrs Tandy, sinking back against the cushions. 'For one moment I dreamed my boy had returned.'

'Your boy, Mrs Tandy, is having a little lesson.'

'A little lesson, Mr Tandy? I should not call being thrown into irons and fetters and starved on bread and water a little lesson.'

'Ralph is better fed than he deserves,' said Mr Tandy, taking a seat on the sofa beside his wife.

'But how can you know that, Mr Tandy?'

'Because I have settled things with his guards.'

'Oh, Papa, I knew you would not be so cruel to poor Ralph!' cried Tiffany.

'But when is he coming home?' Mrs Tandy begged to know.

'Give him a week to think over the folly of gambling.'

'A week!' cried Mrs Tandy and Tiffany together.

'A few days, then,' said Mr Tandy. 'And that's my last word on the matter.' He held up a small hand in a manner that quenched all further discussion on the subject. At least for now. 'And who are you?' he said, turning to Mr Lingham.

Mr Lingham bowed and introduced himself.

'Can you believe it, Papa? Mr Brown is believed to be none other than the long-lost heir of Lord Lansdowne!'

'Is he now?' said Mr Tandy. 'On what evidence?'

'So far, only by the word of two witnesses,' said Mr Lingham. 'Until Mr Brown can be found and interviewed, we can know nothing further.'

'Then you should be out looking for him,' said Mr Tandy.

'Everyone is looking for him, Papa,' said Tiffany. 'All the servants have gone out. He seems to have disappeared. It is very distressing. We don't know what to do next.'

'Why aren't you out looking?' Mr Tandy said to Symes, who had not yet been dismissed by Mrs Tandy. 'Simmons, is it?'

'Symes, sir,' said the footman with a bow of the head.

‘Symes was the last person to see Mr Brown,’ Mrs Tandy said, and the whole of the day’s proceedings were recounted to Mr Tandy. ‘La, I am glad you are come home, my love,’ Mrs Tandy finished with. ‘For you always know what to do. I should have known you had not gone out to enjoy yourself at your club, but to look after our boy. Mr Tandy is the very best of fathers,’ she assured Mr Lingham.

‘Mr Lingham thinks that Mr Butternock might have had some dreadful part to play in Mr Brown’s disappearance,’ said Tiffany. ‘For they are rivals as heirs to Lord Lansdowne.’

Mr Tandy seemed to consider this as he sipped at a glass of brandy he had ordered Symes to pour for him.

‘Could the Bow Street Runners be called in?’ Laura asked, a little timidly, for she always felt a little subdued in Mr Tandy’s presence.

‘There is not enough evidence of any crime committed,’ said Mr Lingham.

‘If Mr Butternock had a notion of removing Mr Brown,’ said Mr Tandy, holding his glass before his face and watching Symes over the top of it. ‘He would need to employ help from the criminal world, would he not, Symes?’

Symes only betrayed that he was startled at being addressed so directly by a rapid blink of his eyelids. ‘Sir?’

‘You came from a background of petty crime, did you not?’

‘Symes is a loyal employee,’ Mrs Tandy said warmly. ‘His days of youthful folly are long behind him.’

‘I should hope they are,’ said Mr Tandy. ‘But are there such fellows in London who could be hired for such a scheme? And would they be easy to find?’

Symes did not answer Mr Tandy directly. He looked at Mrs Tandy thoughtfully, as though he was weighing something up in his mind.

‘There’s a reward of five hundred pounds for knowledge leading to the recovery of Mr Brown,’ Mr Lingham added.

Symes’s eyes blinked rapidly again

‘If you can think of anyone to ask,’ Mrs Tandy urged her footman, ‘Do so for my sake. Poor Mr Brown was such a kind man. He does not deserve anything bad to happen to him.’

Symes was dismissed, and only Laura was seated in view to catch the look on his face as passed out of the room; the usual polite mask he wore had been replaced by a mixture of determination and a gleam in his eyes. He did not appear again that evening; the second footman came in when next the bell was pulled.



HENRY LAY with his ear to the floor. If he focussed all his attention, he could just make out raised voices, all of them male, except for one shrill female. The voices came and went. He was sure he was above a public house of some kind, perhaps an inn. The one window in the room was boarded over. He had tried tugging off the boards until his fingers were raw, but the iron nails were too long and deep.

He knew he was at least two floors up from the ground, for he had counted the stairs when he was brought in blindfolded. He'd checked every inch of damp wall and dirty wooden floor, but there seemed to be no chink in this room. The fireplace was tiny; he could not access the chimney through it. He was secured very well in his dismal prison. How could he have been so careless to let such a thing happen to him? There was no source of light or heat in the room. All was gloom, in keeping with his mood. There was a thin mattress, a scratchy blanket, and a small table and a pair of chairs. The table held a tin pitcher of water and a cup.

A rattle of a key in the lock alerted Henry to his captor's return. He composed himself to look at ease, when in reality, every muscle was tense. The thin, angular man in the shadow-coloured coat had a remarkable ability to emerge out of nowhere. One moment the door creaked on its hinges, and the next the man was in the room, sliding a battered wicker basket across the floor.

'Bit o' yammery,' said the man, indicating the basket. He leaned against the door. 'Go on. 'Ave a peep.'

Henry, out of curiosity rather than obedience, lifted the lid of the basket with his foot. A loaf of bread, some kind of savoury pie, and a glass bottle. So, he was to be kept alive.

'How long do you intend to keep me here?' Henry asked.

'Til I get word to let you go. You won't get hurt, so long as you sit tight and quiet.'

'Who is paying you to do this?'

'Eat up. Pie tastes best hot. Bit greasy cold.'

'I hope Mr Tandy is paying you well. I believe kidnapping is a hanging offence in this country.'

'You got all you need. Proper mattress, hot food.'

'My clothes are dirty and rumpled. I need fresh linen, washing water, some heat to drive out the damp. I need somewhere to relieve myself.'

'Use the fireplace.'

‘There is no fuel.’

‘For *relievin’* yourself.’

‘That is disgusting. I also need exercise, bodily and mentally. A man can go mad locked up with nothing to do.’

‘I’ll get you summat to do.’ The man slipped out as deftly as he had arrived, locking the door behind him.

Henry took up the bottle and positioned himself behind the door. It felt a long time, but likely it was no more than ten minutes before the key turned in the lock again. He raised the bottle, ready to strike as soon as that thin head came into view. But the head did not appear. The door only opened a few inches, then something small was tossed onto the floor and the door pulled shut again before Henry had time to grab at the handle.

It was a grubby pack of playing cards. Out of sheer boredom Henry took them to the little square table and flicked through them, noting there were two extra aces. A long day stretched before him.

SYMES HAD SEARCHED ALL the usual haunts of his cousin Lemmy.

‘How should I know where he is?’ Uncle Tod said, when Symes returned to the Hog and Boar off Monmouth Street.

‘He’s on some lay for the Butternock cove, you know that, Unc.’

‘He never said nothing about where he were keepin’ the feller.’

‘Can’t believe he went in for it,’ said Symes, rubbing the back of his neck. ‘They’ll hang ‘im for kidnapping a gent.’

‘Only a foreigner,’ said Uncle Tod.

‘Turns out he’s some aristo,’ said Symes. ‘Born in the purple. I need to find Lemmy. I can get him more blunt than that shuffling feller’s promising. Can get him out of what might turn out to be a nasty bit ‘o trouble. He’ll swing for sure, Uncle Tod. You got to help me find him.’

‘Hah!’ cried Uncle Tod.

‘Ain’t no time for laughing!’

‘Look who just slunk in!’

Symes looked over his shoulder at the door of his uncle’s inn. ‘Well, if that don’t beat all,’ he exclaimed. ‘I been looking everywhere for you!’

‘Been busy,’ said his cousin, joining him at the counter. ‘Bottle ‘o the best, Uncle Tod.’

‘I got to talk to you,’ said Symes, glancing around the room to make sure no one was within earshot. ‘There’s a way you can make more gingerbread than wot that slippery feller’s paying’ you, and it won’t end wi’ you on the Tyburn rope for kidnapping an aristo.’

‘An aristo?’

‘There’s a lawyer looking for him. He’ll shell out a monkey to anyone who knows where to find ‘im. All you gotta do is clear out the way, an’ I’ll see the lawyer finds him, then get the blunt. We’ll split it.’

‘What do I want to take two-fifty for when Mister B will owe me four hundred by the end of it? You never was good with numbers, Symes.’

‘He ain’t going to pay you. He’s under the hatches with tradesmen. Been living on ‘spectations, and now his ‘spectations is about to up and fly away. He’ll be making a dash for it over the water. You ain’t going to see a penny. Do it my way an’ you’ll get half a monkey and be well out of it. This is a right chancy business, Lemmy. This ain’t no ordinary lay.’

‘An undergame,’ mused Lemmy, watching his uncle line up three cups. ‘All I got to do is let the cove be found?’

‘Sounds tight to me,’ Uncle Tod advised, pouring three generous shots of white rum. ‘I’ll call on the lawyer cove tonight,’ said Symes. ‘Get it over with.’

‘Have to make sure Growler’s out the way and lying low,’ said Lemmy.

‘You didn’t use that lummo!’ Symes exclaimed. ‘Regular porridge-brain, he is!’

‘Needed some brawn.’ Lemmy downed his shot.

‘Hope he didn’t rough him up. He’s not a bad sort, even if he is foreign.’

‘Nah. Treatin’ ‘im like royalty. Hot pie, four-shilling bottle o’ wine.’

‘So where is he?’

Lemmy didn’t answer.

‘Tell ‘im, Lem,’ his uncle advised. ‘This lay’s too deep for the likes of us. Yer ma, rest ‘er soul, wouldn’t have liked it. She’d say it weren’t an honest lay to be keepin’ a body holed up.’

‘I don’t much care for it,’ agreed Lemmy.

‘Tell me where he is,’ Symes pressed.

Lemmy mused for a minute, then downed his shot. ‘Top room next to Nell’s place in Chicksand,’ he said, smacking his cup down.

‘That ramshackle place falling to bits? The cove’ll fall through the floor!’

‘Nah. Top floor’s sound enough. Stairs is a bit rackety. I’ll get along, make sure all’s clear. Growler should be long gone.’

‘Right,’ said Symes. ‘Give us another round, Unc, to set us up.’

‘YOU AIN’T EATEN NOWT.’

It was not the thin man who came into the room later that

evening, but the heavy man with the name of Growler. He brought in another food basket and a lamp. After locking the door behind him, he set the food and lamp on the deal table.

‘How do I know it’s not poisoned?’ Henry was annoyed to have been found dozing in the dark when the door opened. But even if he had been alert, he would have had difficulty knocking out the great burly fellow with only a bottle.

‘Poison? Ain’t no poison. Lemmy told you no one gets hurt. You just got to sit tight a while. Feed ‘im like a king, Lemmy said. Keep ‘im sweet. Look, got some chicken an’ a four-shillin’ bottle.’ He licked his lips.

‘And I’m to believe everything you say? You are a criminal and a kidnapper, so why not a liar and poisoner?’

‘Give the bottle ‘ere, I’ll show you it ain’t poisoned. You is a regular bugaboo. Proper yelper.’

Growler whipped out a pocket-knife and drew the wax seal from the bottle and took a long draught. ‘Better than Blue Ruin.’

Henry was thirsty, having finished the water in the jug, so he took the bottle, wiping the mouth with his handkerchief first before taking a mouthful. He pulled a face. ‘Whoever charged you four shillings a bottle, they have been – what’s the phrase? – *gammoning* you.’

‘Is he now, the thievin’ blighter!’

‘Perhaps it was the same person whose cards these belong to,’ said Henry, nodding at the grubby pack on the table. ‘There are six aces in it.’

‘That’s my pack,’ said Growler. ‘Don’t keep the spares in when I’m playing.’

‘So you’re a kidnapper *and* a card sharp,’ said Henry. He sat down at the table, took up the tin cup, and poured out a generous amount from one of the bottles. ‘I’m weary of my own company. Care for a game of vint-un and a share in my supper? We’ll play for four-shilling wine, shall we?’ He shuffled the pack.

Growler hesitated, then plonked his bulk down on the other seat; the rickety chair creaked in protest. The cards grew greasier as Growler ate chicken legs and played at the same time. Henry chatted as lightly as if he were in a drawing room sipping tea with ladies rather than a dank, bare room with a thug who had never had a bath in his life, judging by the smell. He let Growler win more often than he deserved, pouring the first bottle out for his winning cups, and pouring a small amount of the new bottle for himself. But he underestimated the physical strength of Growler. Henry had tipped all of the sedating draught into the first bottle, but Growler was knocking back cup after cup without any effects showing on his bristly, grimy face.

Henry poured out the last of the laced wine with a feeling of dismay. What else could he do to gain his escape? Why couldn't it have been the thin, wiry fellow drinking up? There was enough sedative in the wine to knock out six men for a whole night. But Growler played on, working his way through the cold pie once he'd finished the chicken.

'Ha! I won again!' he gloated. 'Fill 'er up!' He stamped the empty cup on the table. Henry poured out some of the second bottle. Growler tossed back the cup, then hiccupped loudly. His cracked lips parted in a grin, showing two missing eye teeth. He hiccupped again, and then his face fell forward and his head landed with a thud on the table. The cup clattered to the floor.

'At last!' muttered Henry, snatching up the key and darting for the door. 'Sweet dreams, *mon ami*.'

Behind him, Growler lifted his head and slurred out, 'Gerr-back 'ere, you...' and staggered to his feet.

Henry's eyes widened in surprise – how could the man still stand? He hurriedly unlocked the door while Growler fell over his chair, smashing it, then staggered up again. Henry yanked open the door, slamming it shut and turning the key in the lock just as Growler reached the door with a roar.

The landing he stood on was dark and empty. All the murmuring voices he'd heard came from next door; this building seemed abandoned. He yelped as his foot went through a rotten piece of board on the top stair. It would not do to fall through the floor and break his neck after the trouble he'd had to escape. There was a thundering noise as the door behind him was assaulted by the irate Growler, shouting muffled oaths. Despite the urgency of his escape, Henry picked his way gingerly down the stairs, testing each step, praying nothing would give way beneath him. As he reached the last steps, he heard the splintering of wood as the door above opened with a crash. Growler had broken loose.

The night air was sweet in its offering of freedom, though it certainly did not smell sweet. All the unsanitary smells pertaining to an inn frequented by the lowlife of London filled his nostrils – but – oh, to be free! And then he heard a shout and glanced across the street to see the thin, wiry figure of his first kidnapper staring at him as though he couldn't quite believe his own eyes. Henry took off at a sprint, feeling very disadvantaged by his lack of food, but absolutely determined not to be caught and restored to the tedium of captivity, nor to face the wrath of Growler, if he hadn't fallen through the stairs by now.

The blood pounded in his ears as desperation fuelled him with the strength to run, but he could hear his captor gaining on him. He was

dimly aware of the sound of carriage wheels behind him in the street, and he ran faster, feeling as though his chest would burst. There was the sound of shouting and his foot struck a hole, and he staggered forwards, lost his balance, and fell. Behind him, a Cockney voice yelled out, 'Easy, miss! Don't put his lights out!', followed by a groaning noise.

'Mr Brown!' called a voice, 'Mr Brown!' A slim figure in a veil and cloak threw herself down to his side. 'Oh, Mr Brown, thank God you are alive!'

'Miss Dymond! How did you—?' he scrambled up, flooded with the desperate need to get himself and Miss Dymond to safety. It seemed dreamlike that she should be here in the midst of this strange misadventure. A figure lay groaning in the street a few paces away. A tall man bent over him. 'Miss Dymond,' said Henry, 'did you...?'

'My umbrella,' said Miss Dymond.

'Saved again by your iron-handle, dearest Laura.'

He could not see her face by the gloomy twilight and through the dark veil she wore, but she did not protest at his familiar use of her first name. The tall man darted towards them, urging, 'Quick, now, in the carriage.'

'What about that man?' Miss Dymond asked.

'He'll live.'

'He shouldn't get away,' Miss Dymond protested. 'Why are you letting him go?'

'I ain't putting him in the carriage, miss. Be like putting one of them wild cats at the Tower in wiv you. Quick now, miss, streets are getting lively.'

A crowd of rough-looking men were emerging from the inns and gin shops as word ran round that a prime mort had socked some blighter in the street.

Henry recognised the tall man as Mrs Tandy's footman, Symes. Out of his usual livery, he looked quite at home in the rough streets. While Miss Dymond and Symes had been debating what to do about Henry's assailant, Henry had shepherded Miss Dymond to the waiting carriage. He climbed in after her, and Symes slammed the door, then jumped up on the box next to Mrs Tandy's coachman.

Through the carriage window, Henry saw the figure of the man called Lemmy stagger to his feet and lope away into the shadows. And as they passed the ramshackle building where he had been held captive, he saw the bulky form of Growler limping away into an alley.

'Oh, to be safe at home!' exclaimed Miss Dymond. 'What a horrible place this is!'

'I don't know that I have anywhere to call home,' Henry said, swaying as the carriage moved away. 'But I'm glad it's not among

these streets.'

'Oh, Mr Brown, there is so much to tell you, I hardly know where to begin! But first – how are you? Are you hurt?'

'I'm not hurt.' If Henry did not feel so grubby and unkempt, he would have sat beside Miss Dymond. Perhaps even taken her hand, so glad was he to see her, and so relieved was he to be free again. But his distaste at his dishevelled and unwashed state kept him on the other side of the carriage. 'How came you to be in such a part of London, Miss Dymond? What were you thinking of?'

'Of you, Mr Brown. I could not sit by and do nothing.'

'But how did you find me?'

Miss Dymond related her tale. They had all been frantic upon realising he was missing. Mrs Tandy had sent out all her menservants to search for him, and said she would double Mr Lingham's reward if she could.'

'Who is Mr Lingham?' Henry demanded. 'Double what reward?'

'I shall come to that,' Miss Dymond promised. 'It was Symes, Mrs Tandy's footman who found out your whereabouts. He has old acquaintance and family in the east end. I recalled Master Ralph saying many a time that if one wanted to know anything at all, only ask Symes and—'

'And pay him a shilling,' finished Henry.

'He returned to us, claiming he had uncovered information about where you were being held. A message was sent directly to Mr Lingham, and I came away in the carriage to find you.'

'And Mrs Tandy agreed to you coming away?' Henry could not believe it.

'Not exactly. I confess I did not tell her what I was about. But what does it matter? How could I sit around waiting for news? Mr Lingham said runners would be sent to investigate, but what if they did not make haste? There was no time to waste, and I made Symes come with me.'

'He should not have agreed to it,' Henry said. 'It was dangerous. 'I don't know what he was thinking of.'

'I am afraid I did something very wicked to make him do so.'

'You do something wicked? Not possible.'

'But I did. I happen to know that it was Symes who taught Master Tandy how to play certain card games and told him the names of places where he would go and get into debt. I threatened to tell Mr Tandy all about it if he did not take me to you. So you see, I have become a blackmailer, Mr Brown.'

'And would you have told Mr Tandy?'

'Of course not.'

'Then you are no blackmailer, Miss Dymond. You are a resourceful

heroine. But I am still angry with you for venturing into such dangerous streets.' But there was no anger in his voice, and he knew that she understood him. 'Now, who is Mr Lingham, and why is there a reward upon my head?'



‘THERE’S NO TIME TO LOSE,’ Mr Lingham said, waving away Mrs Tandy’s protests.

‘Our Mr Brown has been through a dreadful time,’ Mrs Tandy said. ‘He needs a good night’s sleep.’

‘If we do not travel to Eastersham directly, he might never meet his grandfather,’ said Mr Lingham. ‘I assure you I take no pleasure in travelling through the night. Dreadful stretch of road crossing Clapham.’

‘Then you must not go, Mr Lingham. Our Mr Brown has just escaped violent kidnappers, and now you want to drive him through highwaymen territory in the dead of night!’

‘We shall be well armed, Mrs Tandy. The coachman assures me he is a very good shot,’ Mr Lingham promised.

‘I am ready,’ said Henry, coming down the stairs to join Mr Lingham in the hallway of the Tandys’ house.

‘La, Mr Brown, do wait till morning, pray do! We’ve just got you back from them murdering kidnappers, and now you’re going to the other end of the country with nothing more than a pair of blunderbusses to protect you.’

‘He is only going twelve miles out of London, Mrs Tandy,’ boomed her husband, who had become very affable to Henry now that it was known that Henry was to be a wealthy lord. ‘It’s right, he should make his way directly to his ancestral home and stake his claim.’

‘You of all people, Mrs Tandy,’ said Henry, ‘will understand my desire to meet my last remaining relative before it’s too late. At least, the last remaining relative I have any wish to be reconciled with.’ He thought ruefully of Mr Morton Butternock, the cousin who had almost certainly been behind the kidnapping plot.

Grouse, the butler, held out Henry’s coat. Mrs Tandy resigned herself to Henry’s determination to leave, and called for carriage rugs and a flask of Mr Tandy’s best brandy.

Henry gave a final glance towards the stairs, disappointed not to see Miss Dymond one last time.

LAURA WAS SO impatient to leave Tiffany’s room that she kept skipping lines from the book she was reading to reach the end of the chapter more quickly.

‘I’m sure you are leaving parts out,’ Tiffany protested from her bed, where she lay in her lace-trimmed gown, her hair in curling rags. ‘You know I cannot sleep until you have read to me.’

‘I should like to say goodbye to Mr Brown,’ Laura confessed, lowering the book.

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ said Tiffany. ‘If you go down there in your night rail, he will think you very fast. I still haven’t forgiven you for running off to find him. It was reckless beyond words. Anyone would think you were in love with him. You are not in love with him, are you?’

Laura was silent.

‘I hope you’re not, dear, for I have a notion that Papa will now think him a very good replacement for Mr Butternock. I wonder if the runners have found that vile person yet.’

‘Do you care for him?’ Laura asked quietly.

‘Who, Mr Brown?’ Tiffany yawned. ‘To be sure he is a great improvement on Mr Butternock.’

‘Who is not?’ said Laura dully. She closed the book. ‘Please, may I retire now, Tiffany? I am dreadfully tired. The words are swimming about so.’ It was not easy to keep her voice steady. An image of Tiffany, beautiful and radiant in a wedding gown, floated vividly before her mind’s eye. And beside Tiffany stood Mr Brown, immaculately dressed in wedding clothes, smiling down at his bride with that dazzling smile he reserved exclusively for her. Laura blinked away tears.

‘Good night, Laura,’ said Tiffany sleepily. ‘Turn the lamp down on your way out.’

Laura hesitated in her little bedroom. She wanted so much to see Mr Brown before he left. She knew how life changing this urgent journey to see his grandfather was. And if she did not see him now, who knew when she might see him again? Perhaps never.

But that image of Tiffany in her wedding gown tormented her. Perhaps it would be better to not see him this one time. It would only prolong the pain. She must forget him. She would find a new position as soon as she could. She had no wish to remain in this house while all the wedding preparations were taking place. It would be too painful. But some desperate part of her simply *had* to see him one last time.

She took up the gown that came first to hand, stepping into it with her nightgown underneath, snatching up a shawl to drape about her shoulders to hide the fact that she was in too much of a hurry to tie up all the fastenings. She rushed out, down the gallery, down the stairs. She could hear voices in the hall; she heard *his* voice. She flew faster, rounded the top of the landing and saw at the bottom of the hallway the door closing. ‘No!’ she cried out. ‘Wait!’

Mr and Mrs Tandy looked up in surprise at her. 'My dear Laura,' called out Mrs Tandy. 'What are you about, running through the house in bare feet and your hair all loose and wild. La, child, you look like a gypsy. Good thing Mr Brown has just left. You would not want him to see you like that.'

MORTON BUTTERNOCK HAD ONLY one slim chance left. His servant, Coffey, had informed him that he had seen Mr Brown going into the Tandy house an hour earlier, getting out of a carriage with a woman. Coffey thought it must be that lady's maid or companion. She'd been veiled but was too tall to be the young miss of the house, and too slim to be the mother.

Morton stared at his servant. 'It can't be! He can't have! How the blazes did he—?' He paced up and down his small sitting room, dimly aware that Coffey had a smug look on his face. 'Did you tell anyone?' Morton demanded, lunging at Coffey and seizing him by the collar with both hands. 'Did you?' He gave him a shake.

'Tell who what?' cried Coffey, struggling free. 'What do I know? Watch the Tandy house, that's all you told me!'

Morton released him after one last shake. He began pacing up and down again, biting his nails. His heartburn was rising fast. Damn that villain who'd taken his money and failed him! That French usurper was like a cockroach that could not be squashed! And damn this corset, it was the cause of this fire in his chest!

'I've got to finish this,' he murmured. 'If I can't keep the Frenchie out of the way, then I'll have to finish it myself.'

'Finish what, sir?' queried Coffey, watching him from the safety of the doorway, ready to dart out if his master made another lunge.

'Mind your own blasted business, you snivelling rat. Get back to Hanover Square and watch the house. I want to know who comes and goes.'

'It's dark, sir. And starting to rain.'

'I don't care if it's raining down brimstone!' shrieked Morton. 'Get back there and find out what's happening!'

When Coffey had slunk out, Morton resumed his pacing. What was he to do next? His eye fell upon the little jewel box that had come from Grey's jewellers that afternoon. He took up the box and lifted the lid. Inside lay a magnificent diamond and sapphire engagement ring to present to Miss Tandy. He'd been planning to present it the next day, but now that French flea was back in the house, his plans were thwarted. And what if the wretched fellow knew something about who had arranged his kidnap? What if that piece of kennel filth he'd

hired had bleated on him? He, Morton, would deny everything, of course, if they came after him. They could not prove that he had anything to do with it. He had been careful. No one had seen him with the villain. And he was about to become Lord Lansdowne. No magistrate would take the word of a ruffian over the word of a lord. The only thing that mattered was that the Frenchman did not make himself known to that interfering lawyer. There was only one thing for it: Uncle Mort had to die quickly.

‘I have to finish this,’ he murmured. He snapped the jewel box shut. His mind was made up. He shouted for Coffey. Then recalled that he had sent the miserable fellow away. He would have to get the horse from the mews himself. He detested riding, but it was the quickest way to get to Eastersham, and more discreet than turning up in a curricule. He marched to his room, struggling out of his tight coat as he went. He would need his warmest coat and his riding boots. And this wretched corset was coming off.

‘I HAVE COME TO SAY GOODBYE.’ Morton held his hat to his chest and bowed his head in a solemn pose.

‘The master is asleep,’ the housekeeper told him. She raised her lamp a little higher, as though to make sure that it was the master’s nephew who had roused her from her bed. The staff of Eastersham always retired early. ‘It’s near one in the morning, sir.’

Morton bit back a retort. How dare this woman keep him standing on the doorstep of his own house! How he hated all his uncle’s servants. They could all whistle for their pensions, no matter what the will said.

‘I had to come, Mrs Robertson. I know he is in decline. I wish to see him before...’ he made his best effort at a little sob, ‘before it is too late.’ Mrs Robertson looked unconvinced. ‘He is the only relative I have left,’ he added. ‘Almost all I have in the world.’

‘Our orders were to let no one in save Mr Lingham and the doctor.’

‘Did you not receive your new orders?’

‘New orders, sir?’

‘The scurrilous lies surrounding me with regard to my uncle’s *false* heir have been unmasked. The butler was lying.’ He rummaged in his coat pocket for the letter he had written in anticipation of this scene.

Mrs Robertson took the note as if it were something poisonous. She placed her lamp down and scanned the brief missive informing her in the name of Lord Lansdowne’s solicitor that the restriction on Mr Butternock’s access to his uncle’s house was now cancelled due to further information.

‘I should have thought...’ said the housekeeper slowly, ‘that Mr Lingham would have written on his usual headed paper.’

‘Dare you to counter all of your superiors, madam?’ Morton drew himself up in an indignant pose. ‘I have ridden twelve miles without ceasing. I am excessively weary, and my horse needs attending to.’

The innate laws of deference and hospitality won in Mrs Robertson’s wavering mind. ‘I’ll wake up one of the men to see to your horse,’ she said resignedly, stepping aside so Morton could enter the house. ‘I shall prepare a room for you, sir. I dare say you will wish to retire for the night and see my lord in the morning.’

‘Do not trouble yourself, Mrs Robertson. I want no room prepared. I wish to sit at my uncle’s bedside, for it may be his last night.’

‘As you wish, sir. The night nurse is with him at present.’

‘POOR DEAR UNCLE,’ Morton said sorrowfully, on entering his uncle’s bedchamber. He pulled out his handkerchief and dabbed at his dry eyes. His uncle’s face was ghastly grey in the soft lamplight. Morton could hear no breathing, could see no rise of the chest beneath the white linen of his uncle’s nightgown. He was as still as a statue. ‘Is he dead?’ he asked, a surge of hope rising. ‘He appears not to breathe.’

‘He’ll draw breath in a moment,’ said the nurse. Sure enough, after what seemed like a long time, Uncle Mort took a deep rattling breath, and his chest began a faint rise and fall motion.

Morton sank into a chair near the bedside with a sigh. The nurse gave him a sharp look. ‘What a relief,’ said Morton, putting a hand to his heart. ‘Thank my stars I did not come too late. Has he long left for this world, do you think? His breathing is excessively irregular.’

‘Won’t be long now,’ said the nurse matter-of-factly. She settled herself down into her own chair at the end of the bed and took up her knitting.

It was stifling hot in the room. Despite it being almost June, there was still a fire in the hearth. Morton got up to open a window and leaned out for a minute to take a breath of air.

‘Close the window, sir,’ said the nurse. ‘Night air is bad for his lordship’s lungs.’

Morton felt rebellious and left the window open, drawing the heavy curtains so the nurse could not see it.

‘You may as well take some rest, Nurse,’ Morton suggested gently. ‘I will sit with my dear uncle tonight. I am sure you are weary with long nights of watching.’

‘I’m paid to sit and watch, and that’s what I do, sir.’

Morton ground his teeth with vexation. Always there was someone in his way.

Mrs Robertson came in presently with the plate of sandwiches and bottle of brandy he had requested. She brought tea for the nurse. ‘Thought I may as well make you up a pot while I’m about it,’ she told

the nurse.

‘Anything else I can get for you, sir?’ Mrs Robertson enquired frostily. ‘If not, I shall retire again.’

Morton assured her graciously that she might retire in peace.

‘Take a little of this in your tea, Nurse,’ Morton suggested, approaching her with the decanter of brandy.

Nurse looked surprised at being offered something so luxurious. ‘Well, perhaps just a drop, sir.’

Morton poured a large measure into her cup and pulled his chair closer. ‘I hear from my uncle’s staff that you do an admirable job, Nurse. Pray, tell me of all that you do for him. Have a sandwich. Take another drop.’

It took a deal before the nurse grew drowsy, but at last her knitting needles fell silent and her head lolled back against the wing of her chair. A soft snore came from her and Morton tiptoed to his uncle’s bedside and took up a spare pillow. It was all so very easy. after all. In a few minutes it would all be over. He would sit back down in his chair, toast himself with the last of the brandy, and fall asleep, and when the nurse awoke, she would find her patient had slipped away peacefully in his sleep. She would be too ashamed to admit that she had fallen asleep from drinking brandy; no one would know of that detail. She would rouse him to tell him the sad news, and he would be suitably grief stricken, but with all the dignity of a lord.

The pillow descended, and Lord Lansdowne’s eyes opened. Morton gasped. ‘What are you about, boy?’ rasped his uncle. Morton hesitated. It was one thing to smother a statue-like figure in the shadows – it was quite another to smother a conscious man. He wavered, and in his agitated thoughts he imagined he heard the sound of that wretched Frenchman’s voice talking to someone in the hall outside. It could only be his imagination, but it reminded him of what was at stake, and spurred him on to do what he had to do.

‘Good night, Uncle,’ he said softly, and lowered the pillow just as the bedroom door flew open.

‘Put that pillow aside!’

Mr Lingham charged at Morton, his cane whacking Morton repeatedly on the arm and hand. Morton screamed with pain and rage, and a cloud of pillow feathers flew up over the bed. Mr Lingham’s cane beat Morton back from the bed, across the room, towards the window.

Mrs Robertson shrieked someone’s name, and a footman rushed into the room. ‘Lock him up!’ Mr Lingham ordered. The nurse wailed, the housekeeper sobbed, Mr Brown was shielding Uncle Mort with his own body. The footman advanced. Morton’s vision was ringed with a red haze, and a fire burned in his chest.

As the tall, burly footman loped towards him, Morton dived for the open window and heaved his heavy body over the sill, clinging to the wisteria trunk to keep him from a direct fall as he scrambled down. He landed heavily in the camellia bushes below and staggered away. Discarding his corset and tight coat had saved his life, was one of his wild thoughts as he panted and gasped his way across the grounds. He could never have run for his life trussed up like a chicken.



THERE WAS a deal of bustle and noise and confusion in the bedroom of Lord Lansdowne. The whole household had been awakened and every one of them made an appearance in his lordship's chamber over the course of the next half hour. Mr Lingham and the coachman had set off in pursuit of Mr Butternock, and the least elderly of the grooms had ridden away to fetch the doctor. The day nurse had come in with her nightcap on and was fussing round her patient and barking orders to the night nurse, who had been shocked into sobriety by the attempt on her patient's life.

'We're saved!' was a repeated phrase, whispered by the servants as they peeped in to see the new heir and future lord and master of Eastersham. Henry remained at his grandfather's side, not daring to move, for fear his frail grandfather would die before he had a chance to speak to him.

'Everyone out!' Lord Lansdowne ordered in his raspy voice when he'd been examined by the physician and the nurse. 'Out. All of you. Not you,' he said, as Henry rose from the bedside chair. 'You come close, where I can see you.'

The servants departed, leaving Henry and his grandfather alone.

'Never liked Morton,' said Lord Lansdowne, leaning back against his carefully arranged pillows. 'Always was a snivelling brat. Surprised he had the gumption to try and put my lights out with his own hands. Come closer, I want to see you.'

Henry obliged. The only way he could get closer was to sit on the bed. He searched his grandfather's face, looking for some resemblance to his mother. But it was impossible to compare the pale, aged features before him with the memory of his beautiful mama. But, no, there was something in the eyes. There was that gleam in the depths that showed a strong will.

'Yes, yes,' murmured Lord Lansdowne, lifting his head to scrutinise Henry's face in return. 'I can see you are your mother's child.' He closed his eyes for a few moments, squeezing them tightly as though he were in pain. Henry was about to ask if he was well when he opened his eyes again.

'She was stubborn,' said Lord Lansdowne. 'Stubborn as a mule and sweet as a kitten. Once she made up her mind to something, nothing could stop her. And she made up her mind to marry that man.'

'My father,' Henry reminded him.

A clock on the mantelpiece ticked away and struck the hour of

five. 'So much time lost,' said Lord Lansdowne. 'Open the curtains, I can't see you properly.'

Henry obeyed, drawing back the heavy curtains to let the dawn light shine gently in.

'Was she happy?' said his grandfather when Henry resumed his seat on the bed.

'She and my father were very happy, sir.'

'She didn't think of me, then. Too busy being happy.'

'She mourned for you, sir. I understand she wrote letters, desiring reconciliation.'

'Pah.' The clock ticked on. A bird trilled outside. 'She was the light of my life,' said Lord Lansdowne, his voice almost a whisper. 'And she left me. Chose him over me. I hated him for taking her away from me. I hated her for leaving.'

'She left me too,' said Henry quietly. 'For a long time I was angry that she should die when I needed her. Angry with God for taking her from me. My father was never the same again. And then I hated the men who killed my father. But hate is a heavy yoke to bear, sir. It crushes one. It turns everything bitter. One has to let it go or there will be no peace.'

The clock ticked, and the bird sang on.

'Suppose you're one of them Catholics.'

'My mother had me christened. But I respect the faith of my father.'

A second bird joined in the chorus.

'It's a cruel thing,' said Lord Lansdowne wearily. 'Not having the chance to say goodbye.'

Henry nodded. His grandfather's fingers twitched, and Henry took hold of his frail hand in his youthful one. 'There will be reconciliation in heaven, sir. I am sure of it.'

Lord Lansdowne squeezed Henry's hand, as weakly as a child. 'I'm glad you're here,' he whispered. 'This is your home.'

Henry nodded again and managed a smile. 'And I won't leave you, sir.'

'I'm on my way out, my boy. I feel it drawing closer. Read me something. In that drawer there.'

Henry leaned over to open the drawer in the bedside cabinet and took out an old, well-read Bible.

'Funny how an old sinner like me wants to remember God when he knows he's about to meet his Maker. I've not thought about Him since I was a boy at my mother's knee listening to her reading stories out of that very book. I wanted to be Samson.' He gave a little cracked laugh. 'Strong enough to carry off city gates.'

'But he met a sad end,' replied Henry, opening the family Bible, the

smell of old leather and aged paper mingling with the surprising smell of lavender and rosemary; someone had put pressed sprigs of dried flowers between some of the pages.

‘Did he?’ said his grandfather. ‘I thought his hair grew back, and he died a hero.’

‘He died blind and before his time. He had all the makings of a hero but could not control his emotions.’

‘Ah, yes. Now I recall. Women. That was his problem.’

‘He was reconciled to his God in his moment of death.’

The quiet turning of pages was added to the sound of the clock and the growing dawn chorus outside the window.

‘Mama liked the psalms best,’ said Henry, finding his mother’s favourite psalm and gently lifting a sprig of lavender from the page. His great-grandmother must have favoured the same one. This thought made him feel more reconnected to his lost heritage. A feeling of homecoming settled over him. For the first time since he was twelve years old he felt he was exactly where he belonged. He began to read.

‘The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul. Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me.’

His grandfather closed his eyes, murmuring something. Henry glanced up at the sound of his voice and for a moment he saw a very different expression on his grandfather’s face. He looked softer, younger. Henry resumed reading. The birds sang their hearts out, the light strengthened as the sun rose over the horizon. Henry felt the memory of his great-grandmother in the lingering scent of dried herbs, felt the memory of his mother; felt all the years of loneliness and displacement melt away; felt a surety that God had shepherded him to safety, to the green pastures and quiet waters of Eastersham. The clock ticked away the last precious minutes of the time Henry had left with his grandfather. There was a greater homecoming ahead. A reunion that would last forever.

FOR THREE DAYS Laura had been unable to leave the house to visit Frederick. It was unbearable to think of him going hungry and him not knowing what kept her away. He must be thinking all kinds of things. She was going to go that morning. She would let nothing stop her. Tiffany would suppose that she had gone to church, as was her custom on Sunday mornings. While Henry sat reading to his grandfather by the dawn light, Laura was lying awake, fretting over Frederick, listening for the church bells to begin their Sunday concert

as her cue to leave the house.

She finished the last of her buttons on her half boots, put her wages into her reticule, and tied her Sunday bonnet on, a straw chip bonnet with demure white ribbons.

She opened her bedroom door to find herself face to face with Lottie. 'Mornin', miss,' said Lottie with an ungainly bob. 'Miss Tandy do want you in her room.'

'Is she unwell?' was Laura's first thought, for it was unusual for Tiffany to be awake at this hour. But then, there had been no late nights since the day Ralph had been taken away and Mr Brown had been kidnapped. Ralph's disgrace and confinement had robbed Tiffany and Mrs Tandy of any desire for balls or routs or visits to the theatre.

Tiffany was sitting up in bed sipping a cup of chocolate. 'You are dressed already,' she noted, as Laura came in. 'What an early bird you are.'

'I am on my way to church,' said Laura.

'That is just what I thought to do this morning.'

'But you never go to church.'

'You make me sound quite a heathen. Of course I go to church. It is only while in town I have fallen out of the habit. So many late nights. I cannot get up before noon. But today I woke up at a civil hour and so I shall go. Help me dress, Laura.'

Laura's heart sank. She would have to delay her plans. She would go to see Frederick after church.

'I thought we could go for a nice walk in the park afterwards,' said Tiffany, putting down her cup and pushing back the covers. 'I feel as though I have not left the house for a month, though it has only been since Friday.'

She would have to see Frederick later in the day.

'And this evening we must cheer mama up. Perhaps we could invite the Partingtons to take tea. You can entertain Cicely. I can never get her into conversation. So haughty.'

'I think she is very shy, rather than haughty.'

'That is what Crispin says.'

Laura raised her eyebrows at Tiffany's use of young Mr Partington's first name, but Tiffany had risen, and was too busy examining her wardrobe to notice. 'Do you think the Partingtons would cheer your mama up?' Laura asked doubtfully.

'Why not? Lady Partington is one of Mama's chief supporters in society.'

'I think you'll find that she is not so supportive once your engagement is known.'

'What engagement? You can't think I would continue in an engagement with a scoundrel? Papa would not permit it, and I am

glad of it. I wish Mr Brown were here. He would know if I should wear the lemon or the sky blue.' Finally, the young ladies descended downstairs, though Laura had to run back up twice to fetch a different parasol and the little bible Tiffany had left behind.

Symes was to walk behind them. He opened the manor door, and a figure bounded up the steps and burst into the hall.

'Ralph!' squealed Tiffany. 'You're home!' She shoved her parasol and reticule into Laura's arms and flung herself at her brother as though they were small children again. 'Pooh, you stink!'

'Warm baths, scented soap and soft towels are not among the commodities that may be bought in Marshalsea Prison, Sis,' said Ralph. He grinned, but he looked pale. 'Where's Mama?'

'Still in bed. But go and wash and shave before you see her. Was it so terribly awful?'

'Little worse than army life, I daresay,' said Ralph, his grin fading. 'Something I shall have to get used to.'

'Did they feed you bread and water?'

'Nah. Ma sent money. If you've money, you can buy what you need. Deuced lot of poor souls with no money though, Tiff.' He suddenly looked older. 'There's a deal of difference being in debt and having a rich Pa to bail you out, and the poor blighters in there with no one to help. Some of them only owed ten pounds, but can't pay it off, nor pay for good food. Crammed into dismal rooms like dogs in a kennel, they are.'

'Oh, Ralph, don't tell me horrible things. You must be sure not to get into any more debt, or Papa will doubtless leave you there for a month next time.'

'Where's Brown?' Ralph demanded.

'He is gone,' said Tiffany.

'Gone where? Didn't get poached away, did he?'

'No. He has gone to be reconciled with his grandfather in Sussex. And there is much more, Ralph, it is *quite* a tale.'

'Then tell me!'

'His grandfather is none other than Lord Lansdowne, the uncle of dreadful Mr Butternock.'

'Thought you was encouraging the Buttercrook fellow.'

'Don't be vulgar. Papa wished me to accept him, but then it all came out that Mr Brown is the rightful heir to Lord Lansdowne, and Mr Butternock did the most dreadful things to try and stop him from inheriting. But we shall tell you all about it when you are washed and changed. I can't talk to you when you smell of cabbage water. Why *do* you smell of cabbage water?'

'That sounds like a tale and a half! Are you bamming me?'

'No, I'm not. It's quite the truth. Mama will tell you so.'

'Let me guess, Papa is going to push you in Brown's way now. Not a bad swap. I always liked Brown.'

Tiffany did not answer this, and the siblings moved away to the stairs. Symes had been given the order to arrange for the young master to have a bath drawn. Laura resigned herself to the knowledge that they would not be going to church that morning after all. The church bells were already sounding out across the town. She trailed behind the siblings, feeling nothing but misery at all she was hearing.

'I say, Laura,' said Ralph, turning to her when they reached the landing of the second floor. 'There was a young fellow I met, name of Fred.'

'Oh?' said Laura, feeling her throat tighten.

'Good fellow. In for debt. Paltry sum. Barely two hundred pounds.'

'There are no good fellows in prison,' said Tiffany. 'Only fools and thieves get themselves into debt, I have heard Papa say so many times. You must never be so foolish again, Ralph.'

Laura thought of how many years she would have to work for to earn the "paltry" sum of two hundred pounds. She earned twenty-five pounds a year with the Tandys and that was an excellent wage, considering she had no bed and board to pay for.

'Shared my food with the fellow. His relations had forgot him, sent no money to him that week for food.'

'I'm sure they did not forget him!' Laura could not help exclaiming, immediately regretting her words when Tiffany gave her a quizzical look. She forced herself to speak calmly. 'It was kind of you to share your food with him, Mr Tandy. Very kind of you to think of others when you yourself were in such unpleasant circumstances.'

'Oh, I fed a deal of them,' said Ralph airily. 'Quite a party we had, even if the beer was dishwater.'

'Don't talk of it,' Tiffany urged. 'It's all horribly unpleasant. Go and have your bath. I shall wake up Mama with the good news.' Tiffany tripped away to her mother's rooms.

'Only mentioned it,' said Ralph, turning to walk to the other side of the house, 'cause I found out just before I left that the fellow's name was Dymond.'

Laura's throat tightened again. She looked mutely at Ralph, wondering if he knew all.

'Unusual name. Wondered if he was any relation?' Ralph seemed to be waiting for her to answer, but she could only manage a little shrug and shake of the head, to dismiss the idea. 'Course not,' said Ralph. He sauntered away, whistling cheerfully, clearly glad to be home.

Laura realised she had been holding her breath and exhaled raggedly. She made a decision in that moment: she would accept the first new position she could find. She loved the Tandys and would

miss them dreadfully, but Tiffany would certainly marry this year. By leaving now, she would not have to watch the unfolding courtship between Tiffany and Mr Brown.



THE FUNERAL of Lord Lansdowne was a quiet affair. It took place in the local church with all the villagers turning out to pay their respects to the man who had been a recluse for many years, and to get a glimpse of the new young master who would be taking over Eastersham. His lordship an amiable fellow, and very *English* looking, which was a relief. The most wondrous stories had been circulating the past weeks regarding this glamorous new heir and a certain Mr Butternock who had been displaced at the eleventh hour. No one liked Morton Butternock, so there were no regrets over the rumours of him fleeing the country in disgrace. Rather, there were tankards of ale and pints of shrub raised in a toast to the fortunate turn of events.

HENRY WAS SO SWEEPED up into all the business attending his new life that the weeks flew by. It had been two months since he left the Tandy house in Hanover Square. Mrs Tandy had sent him a very short letter of condolence on the loss of his grandfather, with a reminder not to forget them. It was clear by the brevity of the note that she was not a letter writer, but he was glad to receive it. He only wished she *had* been a letter writer, then she might have told him of what had happened to Ralph and Miss Tandy and Miss Dymond.

He knew Ralph had been released from debtor's prison, for he had instructed his solicitor to make enquiries over the detention of a Mr Tandy and also to find the recipient of the visits of a Miss Dymond. He learned that Mr Tandy had long been released, while there was indeed a young Mr Dymond in prison for debt. It was a blow to find that the man shared Miss Dymond's name. So he was her husband, rather than a mere lover.

Henry cleared the debt, ordering it to be done anonymously. Miss Dymond could now be reconciled with her husband. He often thought of her as he sat alone in the evenings. They were long, empty summer evenings when he was too tired to concentrate on reading after a busy day in the saddle, attending to the estate with his steward, or closed up in his office with estate plans and ledgers.

Peter Canning was reinstated as butler of Eastersham. All false charges against him were dropped once the infamy of Morton Butternock's schemes had come to light. He was hailed as a hero by the staff of Eastersham, and the new Lord Lansdowne rewarded him with a magnificent increase in wages, new uniform, a refurbished bedroom and office, and a free hand in choosing new servants to

augment the existing ones.

But in the evenings, loneliness crept over the new lord of the manor. It was too early into his period of mourning for him to go into society as Lord Lansdowne. He had been called upon by his nearest neighbours and been introduced to the unmarried daughter of Sir Greaves of Greaves Manor three miles away. Miss Verity Greaves was a charming girl who dressed well and had a measure of beauty and intelligence. Though he sometimes thought he detected a sharpness of temper in her, but it was too fleeting an impression to be sure of.

Henry found it easy to yield to the regular invitations that Lady Greaves sent to him to join a quiet family dinner. Sir Greaves was an affable man, making up for the coolness of Lady Greaves. Henry would far sooner spend his evenings listening to Verity Greaves playing her harp, watching her elegant figure as she poured tea, or chatting lightly with her over a game of backgammon than sitting alone, thinking of the past.

He never flirted with Miss Greaves, but he was aware that his frequent visits were rousing an expectation in her. Should he allow their friendship to become something more? Would that not be the answer for this ache of loneliness he could not dispel when he business of the day was done? He had found his family home, but he still had no family to share it with. Most likely he could have the pick of the debutantes of the *beau monde* if he were to attend the season next year. But why not marry Miss Greaves and spare himself all that show and shallowness? What was holding him back from pressing Miss Greaves' hand when they walked together in the gardens of Greaves Manor? What was keeping him from kissing her when they sat alone in the little folly and she would turn her face to him with that look of invitation in her eyes?

Yesterday evening she had told him that her father was intending to take her to London for the little season. She had said it very simply, but he had known what she was communicating: she was informing him that her father considered her ready for marriage. He knew that she wanted him to say something in regard to this, wanted him to make some declaration, even a hint of one. But he had been silent, sensing her disappointment.

He thought this over as he ambled through the terrace walk of Eastersham that evening. A waxing summer moon made the garden bright and magical. It was an evening for lovers, he thought ruefully, as he struggled to understand his own heart and make a decision. He would not toy with Miss Greaves' feelings. The time had come to either withdraw or move forward and make some declaration of interest.

He leaned on the stone garden balustrade, tracing out a few of the

stars in the constellation of Hercules above. It was because he did not feel for Miss Greaves what he had felt for Miss Dymond. That was the reason for his hesitation. When he had kissed Laura outside the church that spring day it had seemed the most natural thing in the world. There was a feeling of belonging when he was with Laura Dymond. But she was another man's wife. He turned back to the house. He would go to bed. And tomorrow, he would ride over to Greaves Manor and take a walk with the young lady of the house. They would sit in the folly, overlooking the ornamental lake, and he would take her hand, perhaps even kiss her, and their courtship would begin.

THIS RESOLUTION REMAINED the next morning, though it felt less romantic by the light of day than it had by moonlight. 'Not full black this morning,' he told his new valet. 'The dark blue waistcoat.' He took up the coffee his valet brought to him each morning. Good, strong French coffee, procured at considerable expense for French goods were hard to get in this time of war. His valet always brought the morning papers: a local gazette and a London paper, which came on the early morning mail coach. He idly flicked through the pages as he sipped his coffee. An advertisement in the back of the London paper caught his eye, and he smiled.

*Pre-tied Neck Cravats of the Highest Quality
All the Elegance of a Private Valet & all the Convenience of the
Independent Man for only 10d
Exclusively Sold at the Best Ready-Made Outfitters
Available in all the Most Fashionable Knots including the
Trone D'Amour & the Waterfall*

So Ralph Tandy was still pursuing his enterprise. He hoped he was doing well. A sudden longing seized him to see the Tandys again. Why had he not visited them these past months when he owed them so much for their kindness? He put down his cup, saying, 'A change of plans, Patterson. Not the morning suit, after all. I will be travelling. I'll dress myself. You go and tell the stables that I want the carriage to go into Town.'

'LA! I began to wonder if we should ever see you again!' Mrs Tandy was as resplendent as ever in her flowing house robe of flame orange with fuchsia pink tassels and a peacock-blue turban. Henry bowed over her hand and kissed it with a real kiss of affection, rather than a

polite brush of the air above the skin.

'I am sorry it's taken me so long to call,' Henry said, taking a seat, as directed. He recalled the first time he had sat in this cheerful saloon with its mismatch of décor styles and colours. It was to this room that Miss Dymond had brought him with his injured head on his first night in London. He had been put in this very chair and shown all attention and hospitality on a day when his heart was breaking.

'I was unsure if I would find you,' said Henry. 'I thought you might have left town after the season. I'm glad to find you here. I've missed you all,' he said truthfully.

'And we have missed you! La! How fashionable we have been! Everyone wanting to hear your story. It's been the *on-dit* of the season! But we had no wish to follow the crowd to Brighton. They never did catch that Buttercrook rascal, did they?'

'No. He's believed to be somewhere in Europe. I don't think he will ever dare return to England. I hear it was his valet man who got half the reward for finding my whereabouts, the other half going to your own footman.'

'To be sure. But how we were taken in by that villain! Not that I ever liked him much, which is saying a deal, for I generally get along with most people, and Tiffany did not care for him either.'

'Miss Tandy was not too distressed, then? I am glad to hear it.'

'Not she, la, no! With all our new fashionableness, we have been invited everywhere – we even went to Carlton House, Mr Brown – can you credit it? To Carlton House! 'Twas a private dinner, for we're not presented, though Tiffany shall be next year, but the Prince of Wales wanted to hear for himself the story of Beau Brown, who escaped the guillotine, rose from valet to baron, was kidnapped and saved his own grandfather's life at the last gasp.'

'It does sound a dramatic story put so succinctly,' said Henry. 'And how did you find the Prince of Wales?'

'Very affable and beautifully dressed, and Tiffany was admired by everyone.'

'And how is Miss and Master Tandy? Is Master Tandy preparing for the army?'

Henry did not receive an answer to this, for there was a bustle of strange noises as a cat streaked into the drawing room and leaped on top of a walnut bureau. A scruffy terrier was in pursuit, a ribbon leash trailing on the carpet behind it as it yapped excitedly at the hissing cat.

'I see Boots and Floss are still at enmity,' Henry noted.

'Silly creatures,' said Mrs Tandy fondly and gave a coo of pleasure as a small child toddled in with a harassed looking young maid running behind.

‘Sorry, ma’am!’ panted the maid. ‘Harry dropped the leash when we were coming in from the garden and Floss caught sight of the cat and...’ Her apologies trailed away on seeing that there was a handsome visitor sitting opposite her mistress. She gave a little gasp, curtsied quickly with a mumbled ‘Beg pardon, milord’, and ran to collect the wayward dog and child.

‘And who is this?’ wondered Henry, regarding the small boy in his neat white smock. His grey, serious eyes were very large in his thin face.

‘This is Master Harry Tandy, our adopted son. Harry, say good day to Mr Brown. La! – you’re not Mr Brown – you’re Lord Lansdowne, I beg pardon. Harry, say good day to his lordship.’

‘How do you do?’ said Henry, smiling down at the child.

The small boy returned Henry’s gaze silently.

‘He don’t speak much,’ said Mrs Tandy. ‘Had a bad time of it in the orphanage, poor lamb. The tender ones suffer worse in there. But he’s coming along nicely, isn’t he, Lottie?’

‘Oh, yes, mum! He laughed at the ducks in the park this mornin’ when Floss was chasing them all in a line down to the pond.’

‘We like to hear him laugh,’ said Mrs Tandy, beaming at the child. ‘Here, Harry, take a cake with you. We like to feed him up,’ she added, holding out a sponge finger to the child. ‘La, how thin he was when he first got here. We named him after you,’ she said, as Harry was shepherded from the room by Lottie. Floss was now perched on the sofa beside Mrs Tandy, begging for cake, having given up on Boots, who sat grooming himself on top of the bureau.

‘After me?’

‘It was Miss Dymond’s idea. When he came from the orphanage he didn’t answer to any name, he’d only been called Boy. So we had to come up with one, and Miss Dymond said why not call him Henry, for we were all full of thoughts of you. So we all agreed, but we call him Harry as a pet name.’

‘I am honoured,’ said Henry, feeling moved. ‘May I consider myself his honorary godfather, seeing as he bears my name?’

‘La! Of all things, that would be the best of all, Mr Br—milord!’

‘And how is Miss Dymond?’ he dared to ask.

Mrs Tandy sighed. ‘Gone. Not more than a fortnight after you left us, milord. She upped and left. We couldn’t be more surprised. Some young man called for her, so the servants said, and she took off with him. Left a note, full of pretty compliments about never forgetting us and always loving us, and apologies for going so suddenly, and talking of a fresh start, but no forwarding address.’

‘I see,’ said Henry, seeing in his mind’s eye that his payment of her husband’s debt had been received, and they had promptly begun their

new life together. 'I hope she is very happy, wherever she is,' he said truthfully, but with a pang that made him feel nauseous.

'Whose fancy rig is that outside?' boomed a familiar voice from the doorway. 'Don't tell me our secret lord has come to see us? It is you – I thought as much! How are you, old fellow? Good to see you!' Ralph bounded in, his face wreathed in smiles, his forehead wreathed in carefully arranged curls. Henry noted the striped waistcoat and spotted cravat immediately, along with the jangle of fobs and seals.

'What's this?' Henry said, as he returned Ralph's vigorous handshake. 'Have you joined the Four-in-Hand club?' He nodded at the gaudy attire.

'Ha! Not likely,' laughed Ralph, greeting his mother with a kiss and plonking himself down on the sofa beside her. 'Ain't got time for racketing about, I'm a busy man!'

'Ralph is a very successful man of business,' his mother said proudly. 'Of course, we have to keep it all hushed up while in town.'

'All the top-lofty crabs and tabbies turn their nose up at anything smelling of shop,' said Ralph, reaching for a clutch of sponge fingers.

'Is it your cravat business?' Henry asked.

'To be sure,' said Ralph. 'Took off like Trevithick's engine once I got them into the right hands. Bit of advertising in the right places. All the working chaps, the clerks and so on, they love 'em! Flying out the door they are, had to open up a factory in Cheapside, got a dozen seamstresses making 'em up. Making a tidy sum out of it. Going into perfume next.'

'Perfume?'

'Making copies of all the top-lofty scents that cost a month's wages for ordinary folks. Make 'em look the thing, nice packaging, good for gifts, sell 'em for a song.'

'Ralph has lots of good ideas,' said Mrs Tandy.

'Paid off all my debt to Pa,' said Ralph. 'No more Blue Ruin or gambling hells for me. Bit of speculating on the 'change instead. More fun than dice, and I've a knack for it.'

'Just like your father,' said Mrs Tandy proudly. 'Ralph and Mr Tandy talk nothing but business and shares and investments now,' she told Henry. 'La, how they talk into the night. Very proud of Ralph, is Mr Tandy. Very proud.'

'What's that knot you're wearing?' said Ralph, suddenly spying Henry's cravat. 'That don't look like one I know of.'

'It's not commonly used in England,' said Henry, touching the cravat he had tied himself that morning. He had been in such a rush to be on his way that he had tied it absentmindedly in a style he had used in his youth, one that had long fallen out of fashion due to its simplicity.

'A new knot,' said Ralph, his eyes glowing. 'Would you show me?'

'Of course.'

'Could I use it?'

'You're welcome to it.'

'I could call it *The Beau Brown*. 'Would would sell like ice in July! The whole town is full of the tale of Beau Brown, the valet turned rich lord! May I? I'll patent it and cut you a share of the profits.'

'You have my hearty consent to call it the *Beau Brown*, and I have no need to share in your profits. It will be a gift to an old friend.'

Ralph leapt up to shake Henry's hand violently, then did a comic jig on the carpet, setting Floss off into a volley of excited barking and Mrs Tandy into whoops of laughter.

Into this rowdiness glided Tiffany, looking beautiful in a silver-braid trimmed walking dress and a straw hat with the crown covered in violets and a silver striped parasol in her hand.

'Mr Brown!' she exclaimed, 'I beg your pardon, Lord Lansdowne, I should rather say!' She threw down her parasol onto a nearby table to hold out her hands to him. 'What a delightful surprise! Not a day goes by that we do not speak of you and wonder how you are getting on! How *are* you getting on?'

'Very well, Miss Tandy. It's such a pleasure to see you all again.'

'What do you think?' Tiffany asked, touching her hat and gown. 'Have I Beau Brown's approval? Mama and Ralph have gone back to their old ways, but I have tried to keep to all you taught me.'

'I noted your ensemble the moment you walked in, Miss Tandy, and I pronounce you a very elegant young lady. There is nothing I would do to improve upon your outfit.'

Tiffany dimpled with pleasure. 'See, Mama,' she said triumphantly. 'I told you Mr Brown would not approve of the peonies. Mama wanted me to wear large pink and blue peonies on my hat, and I said, Mr Brown would choose something more discreet, and so I chose the little violets.'

'You chose perfectly, Miss Tandy.'

'He's not Mr Brown no more, Tiffany, dear,' said Mrs Tandy.

'I beg your pardon, my lord,' said Tiffany, with a pretty curtsy.

'Call me Henry, or Lansdowne. I would not have my old friends be formal with me.'

A footman announced that Lord Partington was waiting in the hall. 'I am engaged to walk out,' Tiffany said. 'Do come with us, *Henry*. He will have brought the barouche. We shall drive down to Green Park and walk there.'

'*Lord Partington?*' repeated Henry, wondering why Tiffany should be walking out with that elderly gentleman.

'Crispin's father died,' Tiffany explained. 'Very near to the time

you lost your own grandfather. Did you not see it in the obituaries?’

‘No. So he has inherited his father’s title.’

‘And his debts,’ said Tiffany. ‘But Papa is helping him to sort things out.’

‘Then your father has given you his blessing?’

Tiffany dimpled again. ‘He has. It will be a quiet family wedding, for Crispin is still in mourning. We hope next month. We haven’t decided where. Crispin is very romantic. He says he would like to get a special license and be married in a rose garden, but we have no roses here. I daresay it will have to be in some draughty church. You will come, won’t you?’

‘My congratulations, Miss Tandy,’ Henry said. ‘I should be delighted.’ A thought struck him. ‘I have a very pretty rose garden at Eastersham, and plenty of room for guests.’

‘Really?’ Tiffany’s blue eyes sparkled. ‘Oh, Mama, did you hear that?’

‘To be sure I did! And I never heard an idea I liked more!’

‘Then it’s settled,’ said Henry. ‘Come and view Eastersham as soon as you can, and I shall make the arrangements.’

‘Oh, Mama, we must go directly!’ Tiffany said. ‘Next week! Cancel all our engagements! Oh, do walk out with Crispin and me and tell him all about it. He will be so pleased!’

‘I would not intrude on a lover’s walk,’ said Henry. ‘I’m sure Lord Partington would sooner have you to himself.’

‘Oh, but we’re never alone,’ said Tiffany. ‘I have a new maid to chaperone me. I suppose you know that Laura left us? Quite unaccountable. I thought of her as a friend, but she did not even leave a forwarding address.’

‘Perhaps she did not wish to embarrass you with a lower connection,’ suggested Henry.

‘That would be just like her, but she should not stand on any ceremony with us, should she, Mama?’

‘La, no,’ said Mrs Tandy. ‘As if we cared for any of that in this house. Go and walk out with Tiffany and her young man, then come back for dinner. And don’t be thinking of taking any hotel room, you will stay here.’

‘I shall walk as far as the mall with you,’ agreed Henry. ‘Then I shall make a call at a favourite coffee-house of mine, and will be glad to return for dinner, Mrs Tandy.’



HENRY DID NOT REALISE the extent of his fame in London until he ventured through the streets; all around him he heard the cry of *It's Beau Brown!* People ran up to him, men desiring to shake his hand and women desiring to introduce their blushing daughters to him. He was relieved to duck down into the side street off the Strand where the little *Fleur-de-Lis* coffee-house was squeezed between a greengrocer's and a shoe repair shop. Once inside, he was hailed as a returning hero by the owner and the regulars, many of them French emigres, and he had to relay his story all over again, first in French, then in English, calling for coffee and cakes for everyone present.

A young man in neat but shabby clothes sat with his coffee at one of the deal tables. He had been reading the newspaper shared among the customers, but had lost interest in his paper as he listened instead to Henry's tale.

'A remarkable story, my lord,' said the young man when he had finished his coffee. 'And I thank you for my cake. It seemed divinely provident.'

'A cake, divine?' Henry laughed back at the young man, liking his open, friendly smile, even if the eyes above it had a sadness in them, as though he had suffered much.

'I came in with only enough coin in my pocket for a weekly treat of a coffee and a read of the papers and wished I had enough for a pastry. The smell is tantalising to a hungry fellow. And then in you come, as if by providence, and buy me what my heart desires.' The man grinned. 'So I thank you again, and pray you a double blessing in return.'

The young man bowed politely and called goodbye to the coffee-house owner. 'Adieu, Monsieur Dymond!' The coffee-house owner called back.

'Wait!' Henry called out. 'Your name is Dymond?'

'Frederick Dymond at your service, my lord.' The young man made another bow.

Henry stared at him. There surely could not be two Frederick Dymonds? So, this was the man. The man he had released from the debtor's prison that he might be reunited with the woman he, Henry, had loved. Did love.

He was very young, Henry thought, examining the face of Laura's husband. He would guess he was at least a couple of years younger than her. He still had the angular awkwardness of youth about him,

but his expression was one of intelligence and good humour.

‘I know...that is...I *knew* someone of that name. The name of Dymond.’

The sadness behind the man’s pleasant face resurfaced. ‘I know,’ he admitted. ‘I know who you are, my lord. I have heard your story before.’

‘How is she?’ Henry could not keep from asking. ‘Is she well?’ He thought he detected a hesitation in Mr Dymond before he answered.

‘She is well, sir. She will be very surprised when she learns I have met you. Though, I may not tell her. The past distresses her.’

‘Her friends would wish to hear from her,’ Henry said. ‘The Tandys were disappointed by her not forwarding an address.’

‘Laura felt it was best to drop all acquaintances from the past. She thought it might embarrass her former employers to keep up the connection.’

‘Then she never knew them.’

The young man looked uncomfortable. ‘I think it’s because of me. She’s protective of me. Doesn’t wish to have to talk about the past.’

‘You mean the prison? Their own son spent time in the very place. Why should they judge Laura harshly?’

‘How did you know?’ The man looked startled, then his face cleared, but he looked subdued. ‘But of course. Mr Ralph Tandy must have told you. That is the other source of embarrassment to Laura, that she feels she can never repay them for releasing me from my debt.’

Henry’s mind quickly gathered that Mr Dymond thought Ralph, who had met him in the Marshalsea, was the one to pay Mr Dymond’s debt anonymously.

‘I must go, sir. Laura will have finished her shopping by now, and I’m to meet her. Thank you again for your generosity.’

Henry watched the young man leave. He sat staring unseeingly at the bottom of his cup. ‘Another cup, sir?’ the serving boy asked. ‘No,’ murmured Henry, giving the boy a shilling tip, and putting a handful of coins on the counter to pay his bill. ‘Adieu!’ he called, clamping his hat on and taking up his gloves and cane, ignoring all protestations at his abrupt departure. A sudden urge had seized him to see Laura Dymond once more. Just to see if she looked well, see if she looked happy. If she did, then he would firmly close the door on that part of his heart. Close it and lock it up, and never open it again, until perhaps he was an old man, looking back over his life from the distance of many years to diffuse the pain. Then he would go home on the morrow and perhaps begin the courtship of Miss Greaves.

LAURA STOOD WAITING PATIENTLY at the corner of Covent Garden market with her baskets at her feet. It was not like Frederick to be late. Saturday afternoon was the one afternoon in the week that Frederick finished work early, so that was the time when the groceries were shopped for. Frederick always wanted to buy things that exceeded Laura's careful budgeting of their earnings, so she would send him off for an hour while she made the purchases. She had told him of a little French coffee-house a short walk away in the Strand said to make the best coffee, and then felt miserable at the remembrance of who it was who had told her that.

It was a very warm afternoon in late July, and she wished she had a fan, for she was too hot standing in the sun. She did not own a parasol anymore, having sold all her pretty items for the rent deposit. She still had her old umbrella, which had to double as a sunshade, but her hands were full with her parcels, the umbrella lying beside the baskets on the ground. She longed for a cold drink and hoped Frederick would not keep her waiting much longer. At last, there he was. She could see his familiar face as he weaved his way through the market goers. He too looked overly warm, his fair skin flushed in the heat.

'Sorry to keep you,' he called as he neared her. He scooped up the two baskets, one on each arm. 'Got chatting and forgot the time.'

'I suppose you were counselling some lost soul again,' said Laura, knowing Frederick's passion for ministering to anyone who would let him. 'You've got crumbs all down you, Frederick. What have you been eating?' She brushed the pale flakes from his coat.

'A very generous fellow came in and bought me a pastry.'

'Very generous,' she murmured, for the price of wheat flour was uncommonly expensive that month. 'What did you do to win such favour?' she asked, picking up her parcels.

'I was merely in the right place at the right time,' said Frederick. His smile was a little awkward, and not his usual open one, but she was too hot and bothered to care to enquire. She only wanted to get home and cool off. The north-facing little pair of rooms they rented would be cold and dark in the winter months, but at this time of the year they were mercifully cool.

The streets surrounding the market were busy and noisy. Laura had a vague feeling that someone was calling her name, but when she glanced back over her shoulder, she could not see anyone behind her in the press of people. They trudged on, turning into a quieter street. Once again, Laura thought she heard someone call her name. She looked back and gasped in surprise.

'Miss Dymond! I thought I had lost you.'

'What are you doing here?' she stammered, feeling her already

flushed cheeks deepening in colour.

‘Why, it’s you!’ exclaimed Frederick. ‘This is the man who bought me a pastry, Laura. Beg pardon, my lord, I can’t touch my cap with my arms full.’

But Henry Brown, now Lord Lansdowne, was not looking at Frederick. He was looking directly at her, and she realised how futile it had been to try to forget him. All the old feelings rushed over her again. How handsome he looked. He had always presented himself immaculately, and seemed finer than ever. He was still in mourning, but his dark blue waistcoat and white shirt gave relief to the black suit, and he was wearing the latest style of men’s pantaloons, and his coat was without wrinkle or pastry crumbs. Suddenly she was very aware of the gulf between them as she stood in her plain and unfashionable gown with Frederick in second-hand clothes beside her.

‘I lost you in the crowd,’ said Henry. ‘I saw you walking ahead and noticed you had left this behind.’ He held up her old umbrella with its heavy iron handle.

‘Thank you,’ she murmured, still feeling a mix of shock and shame and dismay at this sudden meeting.

‘How are you?’

‘I...I am well. How are you? But you need not say, for you look very well, Mr...my lord.’

‘Are you walking far? I will carry your parcels.’

‘Oh, no, you mustn’t!’ A panic seized her. She did not want him to see where she lived. Oh, why had she not insisted on moving out of London as soon as Frederick had been released?

‘It’s two streets away,’ said Frederick. ‘Come and have a glass of something with us.’

Laura glared at Frederick, but he seemed oblivious to her distress. She was aware of Mr...*Lord Lansdowne* looking at her as though he wanted the invite to be seconded, and she wrestled between hating to seem inhospitable to one who had been a friend, and the knowledge that if she let him enter the cramped rooms she and Frederick were housed in, then she would never ever be able to forget him. He would have coloured every corner of her world by stepping into it.

Frederick was cheerfully leading the way, and Mr Brown *Lord Lansdowne* took the parcels out of her hand, holding them in his right hand, with her umbrella tucked under his arm along with his cane. He held out his left arm for her to take, but she pretended not to see it, feeling that closer proximity to him would be torture.

‘I saw the Tandys earlier,’ he said as they began walking.

‘Oh.’ So, he was still in contact with them. Mr Tandy’s plans for Tiffany and the new Lord Lansdowne were no doubt going forward successfully. ‘And...how are they?’

'Very well. But they miss you.'

'I miss them too.' It was the truth.

'Why did you not let them know where you were going?'

'It...it is personal.'

'You can tell an old friend. We are old friends, aren't we?'

She glanced sideways to meet his enquiry. She nodded.

'And I don't have many friends. I cannot afford to lose even one.'

'I'm sure your lordship has as many friends as you could wish for,' said Laura. 'You must be fêted everywhere in society now.'

'That is not real friendship, as well you know.'

'Here we are,' called Frederick, pushing open a rickety gate with his hip.

'I won't come in,' said Lord Lansdowne, handing back the parcels to her.

Laura was relieved, but then she was suddenly grieved that he was going to be gone so quickly. 'Are...are you in London very often?' she stammered, desperately wishing to delay this final parting now that it had come. It would cost her, she knew. Every look she drank in of him, every word he spoke, they would haunt her.

'This is my first visit since my grandfather's death.'

'How thoughtless of me. I did not give you my condolences. I am truly sorry for your loss.'

'Thank you.'

'Sure you won't come in?' called Frederick from the door to the tenement building. 'We've got blackberry cordial, and seedcake. Ah, the comforts of a sister who can housekeep!'

'Sister?' Lord Lansdowne looked at her very sharply and strangely. 'What does he mean?'

'He speaks truth,' said Laura. 'We do have a little cordial and seedcake left. You are most welcome to take some.'

'*Ciel au-dessus!* What does he mean by *sister*?'

'Frederick is my little brother. Who did you think he—? Oh! Did you think—?'

Lord Lansdowne smiled. Not that dazzling smile he reserved for Tiffany or showered upon the ladies of the ton for the benefit of Mrs Tandy, but the quieter smile that he only showed to her. 'Do you know,' he said cheerfully, 'I am very thirsty. And I am most partial to caraway.'

'Our accommodation is very small,' said Laura apologetically. 'We hope to find something better when I start work in September.' She led the way into the dark, poky hall.

'Start work?'

'Yes. As a teacher. Just a little school in Clapham. The term begins in a few weeks. For now we have only Frederick's wages, and I teach

piano a little.'

'And what does Frederick do?'

There were only two chairs in the little sitting room. 'Please, sit down. Frederick is working as a clerk at present. But it is only a temporary position. He is looking for something permanent. May I take your hat and gloves?'

Laura bustled about, feeling rather dreamlike. Mr Brown, no, *Lord Lansdowne*, transformed the cramped, shabby room, seeming to fill it up with elegance and brightness. Half of her heart sang as she mixed up a jug of cordial and cut the slices of cake with a shaky hand. And half of her heart sank, for how could she go back to the slow dullness of the days knowing that he was in the world, so kind and perfect and holding her heart in his hands, though he did not know it.

Frederick and Lord Lansdowne were talking like old friends. What a happy gift Lord Lansdowne had of communing equally with those above him in social rank as a valet, and beneath him as an aristocrat. He was the same wherever he went and whatever his circumstances were. She allowed herself the luxury of quietly watching his face as he talked with her brother, drinking in every expression, every feature, enjoying the sound of his warm, soft voice with the hint of an accent. He was describing Eastersham to Frederick.

'I want you to come to Eastersham, Miss Dymond,' Lord Lansdowne said, startling her out of her musings.

'What do you mean?'

'Exactly what I say. Come and spend a week or two. A holiday.'

'We cannot just leave.' Laura gave a little incredulous laugh. 'Frederick has work on Monday morning.'

'You said it was a temporary position.'

'Well, yes, it is, but we still need...he cannot simply announce he is going on holiday for a week. He will be dismissed.'

'Let me cover your wages,' Lord Lansdowne said to Frederick. 'Let me give you work at Eastersham if you will not come for a holiday. I am in urgent need of someone to help with my accounts.'

'You are?' Frederick looked very interested. He turned to his sister. 'I haven't seen the countryside since...'

He did not need to finish the sentence. Neither of them had seen the countryside since they had lost their family home at the rectory. They had come to London to gain work, and then the terrible thing had happened, and Frederick had been taken from her at only eighteen, and immured in that dreadful place...

'It all seems rather fantastical,' Laura protested. 'To simply leave our responsibilities...'

'Lord Lansdowne has work for me,' argued Frederick. Laura could tell by the look in her brother's eye that he wanted very much to go.

And why should she resist? Why did she feel so fearful? It was because every minute she spent in the presence of Lord Lansdowne would exact a high price afterwards.

‘Please, Laura,’ Frederick begged. ‘Just think, trees and fresh air. How I’ve longed to breathe in fresh air again, and tramp through countryside and sit beneath a tree listening to birdsong.’ Fred looked so wistful, so like the boy she had raised since her mother’s death, that Laura felt the tears start to her eyes. She blinked them away quickly. Lord Lansdowne was looking at her, waiting for an answer.

‘Please come,’ he said gently. She was undone. She could not resist the wishes of the two men she loved. She nodded and murmured, ‘Thank you. You are very kind.’

‘*Excellente!* My carriage will call tomorrow at nine. We’ll be at Eastersham by noon.’



HENRY LEFT the Tandys the next morning, carrying their promises of arriving at Eastersham in two days' time. As his carriage made its way to the dismal little lodgings of Miss Dymond and her brother, he resolved not to tell Miss Dymond of the Tandys' visit until he had her safely at Eastersham. He had a strong notion that she would refuse to come if she knew she would meet anyone else. It was a foolish pride that kept her isolated from those who loved her, even though he did understand her feelings. He'd heard from Frederick all the details of his imprisonment. He knew that Frederick had unwisely borrowed money at a critical time, when he and his sister had first arrived in London, penniless and alone. As a youth who had grown up in a sleepy village he'd had no notion of the unscrupulous interest charges he had incurred, and following the loss of his employment, the small debt spiralled out of his means to pay it.

He liked the gentle, serious young man, and could imagine how grieved Miss Dymond had been over her brother's incarceration in so rough an environment. What a heavy burden she had carried the last two years. But he meant to relieve them, and be a good friend to them, if they would let him. He would like to be more than a friend, but did Miss Dymond feel the same? That was the purpose of this visit. He had to know if she cared for him at all.

He felt like a nervous boy as his carriage came to a halt outside the lodging house. Frederick came out first, his thin face lit up with a smile. There she was. Also, too thin and pale, and her smile was a tentative one. But she had come, and that was all that mattered.

THE STAIRCASE at Eastersham was wider and grander than the spiralling one at the Tandys' mansion house. Everything about Eastersham felt solid, well-crafted and well cared for. The oak bannister shone from careful polishing as Laura trailed her hand along it. She came downstairs from her guest room to find her brother and their host chatting away like old friends in the south-facing sitting room. The sitting room had doors opening onto a garden terrace. Curling strands of honeysuckle clambered round the garden doors, lending a sweet fragrance to the room.

'Is your room satisfactory, Miss Dymond?' Lord Lansdowne enquired, rising from his chair at her entrance.

‘Room?’ she said, with a laugh, ‘rather say *suite*! Was I supposed to be directed to such a grand one?’

He only smiled and said, ‘Would you care for some refreshment?’

‘I have had some. One of your staff was so kind as to bring me a tea tray.’

‘Then, may I show you round?’

‘Yes, please. Could we begin with the gardens? They looked lovely as we came down the carriageway.’ She took the arm he held out and the three of them stepped through the garden doors into the late afternoon sunshine.

After a half hour’s ambling Frederick took a seat in a sunny spot of the Tudor herb garden and said he would rest there among the thyme and mint while they continued on into the walled rose gardens.

‘Your brother is not in full health,’ Lord Lansdowne said, as they walked on.

‘No,’ said Laura quietly. ‘The two years he spent...they quite robbed him of health. He was not altogether strong to begin with. A childhood illness.’

‘He is young,’ said Lord Lansdowne. ‘He will recover.’

‘I hope so.’ Privately she thought that Frederick’s chances of recovering the vitality he ought to have as a young man were slim, so long as they lived in a low part of the city, with him working long hours shut up in stuffy offices labouring over a desk. ‘I wish I could get him to a healthier place. Somewhere in the country. I’m sure he would improve if he lived where the air is clean and the pace of life gentler.’

‘He is very welcome to stay here as long he wishes. You both are.’

‘How kind you are. But you have never been anything but kind to me.’ Her voice wobbled. ‘Thank you.’

They passed through the wrought-iron gate into the rose garden enclosed by red brick walls. A trellis of climbing roses made a long walkway around the perimeter.

‘What a heavenly smell,’ Laura exclaimed, as a wave of scent engulfed her. ‘Such a beautiful garden.’

‘My grandmother planted it. The head gardener’s father worked here in the days of my grandparents. He says she collected roses and would have none that did not carry a scent. They were planted to ensure a display from April to September.’

‘It must mean a great deal to you to learn your family history.’

‘Yes. It does.’ He lifted an exuberant spray of pink blossoms out of the way. ‘What do you think of this garden as a place for a wedding?’

Laura gave him a startled look. Could he be hinting at something? The idea of him speaking to her of marriage was astonishing, and yet...in these surroundings, this fairytale garden, alone with him, and

he so near, so handsome, so like a fairytale prince.

He broke off the stem of the intrusive rose and held it out to her. 'Do you remember the rose the bride gave us that day outside the church?'

Of course she remembered! That was the day he had kissed her! She still had that rose, carefully dried and pressed. She felt her colour rising as she recalled that kiss, and her heart and breath quickened as her eyes were drawn to his mouth, which seemed to be moving closer to her own as he took a step towards her.

'Laura!'

Startled, Laura turned in astonishment to the gateway of the walled garden and could not believe her eyes. Tiffany Tandy was coming towards her, looking radiant in a white lawn gown and a straw bonnet with pink camellias around its brim.

'We could not wait another day!' cried Tiffany. 'Mama agreed that we should set off directly while the weather is so fine. But you never said that Laura would be here! What a surprise! How are you, my dear? I never dreamt I should see you here! And what a beautiful garden it is, to be sure! – I am to be married here next month, am I not, Henry?'

Tiffany laughed prettily and Laura felt her heart shatter all over again. So, it was his wedding to Tiffany he had been speaking of. She could not keep from tears, but Tiffany ascribed them to the joy of their reunion.

'Here is Mama!' Tiffany cried as Mrs Tandy came in, rivalling the roses in a gown of scarlet and green, and an enormous hat covered in silk flowers.

'La! I declare this is just the kind of surprise I like!' she cried, on seeing Laura and grabbing her hands, holding her out to look at her. 'You naughty child, to run away and not tell us where you are, but dear Henry has brought us all together!'

A NOISY AFTERNOON tea on the terrace with strawberries and raspberries and cream brought the whole of Laura and Frederick's story into the open.

'You should have told me all,' Mrs Tandy scolded. 'I would have helped your poor brother, and look at him, such a nice young man. That nasty debtor's prison is no place for a gentleman. Poor Ralph was quite undone when he got home. He had *lice*, you know. Grouse had to burn all his clothes. Dreadful place.'

'Mama has taken to sending food baskets to the prison,' said Tiffany. 'Ralph said that some of the men have nothing but the dreadfully meagre rations the prison gives them.'

'Something ought to be done about it,' said Mrs Tandy. 'There

needs to be reform. If Ralph had any taking for politics, I should encourage him to go into parliament, but he has none. Perhaps it will be Tiffany's sons who rise up to be champions of reform.' She smiled indulgently at her daughter.

Tiffany only dimpled beneath her fetching straw bonnet, while Laura felt heavy at the thought of Tiffany and Lord Lansdowne's children running merrily about the gardens. Little Harry Tandy was enjoying himself very much, chasing after a ball on the lawn that Lord Lansdowne was throwing for him. He would make a wonderful father, Laura thought sadly.

'La, Laura, you have grown pale and thin and quite lost your looks,' Mrs Tandy said, eyeing her over her cream cake. 'Now that we have found you, you shall not get away again. You must come back as companion to me and governess to Harry. Tiffany will be gone next month, and I never see much of Ralph these days, always out on business or up north with his father. I shall be glad to get home again and leave London behind when Tiffany is safely married.'

Laura forced herself to thank Mrs Tandy for her kindness, all the while thinking that she could not bear to be in the Tandy house while all the arrangements for Tiffany's marriage were going ahead. She would have to hear daily of how the new Lady Lansdowne fared, and then news would come that Lady and Lord Lansdowne were expecting their first child. There would be visits between the households. It would be agony.

'I could not leave Frederick,' she said quietly. Frederick had gone to lie down for a nap, confessing that he had no notion how tired he was until he had chance to rest.

'He is not well, is he?' said Tiffany.

'His health was taxed by his life in...' Laura still could not say the word *prison* without a shudder.

'Fresh air, good food, lots of rest,' said Mrs Tandy. 'He'll be a new man in no time. La, what will Ralph say when he hears that the young Fred Dymond he met in that horrible place is none other than Laura's brother? He thought very well of him,' she added. 'Called him the little preacher. He ran Bible studies, I gather. Ralph is not one for spiritual thoughts, generally, but he said there was something comforting about hearing the Good Book read to him when he was so down in the doldrums. He even said a prayer. He made a promise to never gamble at cards or dice ever again if God would get him out of there.'

'My brother has always wanted to be a minister,' said Laura. 'As our father was.'

'Then he should do so!'

'It takes a deal of money to be ordained. It requires a university

education and much study, and a patron to give a living.'

'If he can't be a vicar, he must come and join us too. We'll find something for him to do. And if he doesn't care for town life, he can visit with Tiffany once she's married, can't he my love? Your new home has plenty of trees.'

'More than enough' said Tiffany. 'All you can see for miles are fields and trees. But happily Crispin's estate is so close to Town. I can only endure trees and fields for so many months of the year.'

'Crispin?' repeated Laura. 'Mr Partington?'

'Lord Partington,' said Mrs Tandy. 'His father died two months ago.'

'Almost three months,' corrected Tiffany. 'That is why the wedding will be quiet. Just immediate family. We count Henry as one of the family now, don't we, Mama? Another of your adopted ones.'

'La, to be sure. Dear Henry is quite one of the family, as is Laura. Why, Laura, do share the joke?'

Laura had burst into laughter. A slightly hysterical burst of laughter, as the pressure of pent-up misery was released in a moment. So Tiffany was *not* to marry Lord Lansdowne! 'There is no joke,' she assured Mrs Tandy, when she could speak. 'There is only a sudden feeling of happiness at being here among friends, surrounded by such beauty. Oh, Mrs Tandy, I have not felt so lighthearted in years.'

'That's the spirit, my dear,' encouraged Mrs Tandy. 'Try some of this cake. What a good pastry cook Henry has.'

'Thank you. And some strawberries. And the cream I shall try it all.'

The butler appeared on the terrace and caught Lord Lansdowne's eye. He strolled back to the party, his face looking tanned above the white of his shirt, his brown eyes as bright and as happy as Laura's were at that moment.

'Visitor, my lord,' said the butler. 'Lady Greaves and Miss Greaves.'

All the ladies watched Lord Lansdowne with interest, wondering who Miss Greaves could be. Laura thought that Lord Lansdowne hesitated, before saying, 'Ask them to come and take tea on the terrace.' He straightened his cravat and shirt cuffs and put his coat back on. Mrs Tandy raised enquiring eyebrows at her daughter and Laura. Tiffany returned the look. Lady and Miss Greaves were fetched by the butler. A frosty looking lady appeared and was greeted politely by Lord Lansdowne. Behind her a young lady stood framed in the garden door, a honeysuckle bloom brushing her delightful little bonnet.

'Charming,' murmured Mrs Tandy. 'Very young.'

'Indeed,' agreed Tiffany. 'Very elegant.'

Laura watched in silence as Lord Lansdowne bent over Miss

Greave's hand.

'I am glad to see you home safe and sound,' Miss Greaves was saying in a familiar tone. 'We were quite anxious when you did not call at luncheon, as planned.'

'My apologies, ladies. It was unforgivable of me not to send a note. I left in a hurry on an unexpected visit to town.'

Miss Greaves and her mother cast enquiring glances in the direction of the tea table.

'Allow me to introduce you to my friends.'

'Please do,' said Miss Greaves, smiling charmingly, but with a look in her eye something like alarm as she saw that there were two young ladies in the party, and one of them, very beautiful in her white lawn gown, with her golden curls.

Laura caught Miss Greave's expression as she scanned each of the ladies: her eyes narrowing ever so slightly on seeing Tiffany, then blinking at the sight of Mrs Tandy, as if her vibrant clothes was a little blinding, but they merely slid over herself, taking in Laura's plain gown and unadorned appearance.

The introductions were made, Lady Greaves holding out two fingers to shake, but declining to sit down.

'We came to invite you to dinner tonight, but I imagine you are otherwise engaged with older friends than us,' said Lady Greaves.

Miss Greaves laughed prettily to cover up her mother's cold tone and said, 'Of course, your friends would be very welcome to come too. Papa loves to meet new people.'

'My friends may be too fatigued from their travelling to dine out on their first night,' said Lord Lansdowne tactfully.

'La, I love nothing better than meeting new faces,' said Mrs Tandy. 'Do not turn down a dinner on our account, Henry.'

Miss Greaves looked surprised at hearing Mrs Tandy call Lord Lansdowne by his first name.

'Very well,' said Lord Lansdowne with a half bow. 'We should be delighted to call this evening.'

Laura watched as Lord Lansdowne escorted Miss Greaves out. She saw the way Miss Greaves took his arm in a possessive manner, saw the look pass between them as he bent his head to dodge the overhanging stem of honeysuckle. They looked very comfortable together, arm in arm.

'What a sweet girl,' Tiffany said, reaching for the teapot. 'Our friend has landed very well on his feet. A delightful home with a delightful neighbour. They make a handsome couple.'

Mrs Tandy agreed, but quietly, and without her usual enthusiasm. Laura felt her appetite vanish again.

LAURA STOOD before the vast wardrobe in her dressing room. Her scant collection of clothes looked pitiful in so grand a setting. She only had one good dress: the pale-gold gown that Lord Lansdowne had made her when he was still only Mr Brown. She had resisted selling it along with her other items of value, for it was worth more to her than any pawnbroker's guineas. There was a 'Coo-ee!' from the door and Mrs Tandy breezed in, the train of her hyacinth-purple house gown streaming behind her.

'Upon my word!' Mrs Tandy exclaimed, looking round at the rooms, 'You have the best guest suite in the house!'

'I do?'

'Oh, the pretty gold dress you wore to the Petty-Blount ball. That was what I came about. I wanted to see if you had something to wear. Your gown today was a little tired, my dear, if you don't mind my saying so. Now, don't bristle up, it's only me. I know things have not been easy for you and your brother and I could shake you for not letting us help you, but all that's past.' Mrs Tandy took Laura's hand. 'La, how thin you've got.' She gently pinched Laura's cheek. 'And so pale. It won't do, my dear, it just won't do. We've got to turn you into a picture, my dear. Bring that dress, come to Tiffany's dressing room. Her new maid is prodigiously good at hair and make-up.'

'Make-up?' said Laura, a little alarmed. To her mind, make up was for actresses and courtesans.

'Come along. I won't have you looked down on by that Greaves girl. She's nothing but a slip of a thing. You must fight for him.'

'Fight for who?'

'La, no need to be coy with me. I see how you look at him, and I see how he looks at you, and no chit just out of the schoolroom is going to get in the way if I can help it. Tiffany always said she thought you two belonged together. But you've got to stand up for yourself. No wilting away in the corner, Laura. Shine!'

Mrs Tandy had been ushering Laura down the hall during this little talk.

'What do you mean, you see how he looks at me? *How* does he look at me?'

'Like a man in love, you widgeon, how else?'

'I...I think you must be imagining things, Mrs Tandy!'

'La, for a clever girl, you are a goose at times. Here she is,' she announced, steering Laura into Tiffany's rooms. 'Never mind Miss Tiffany's hair,' she said to the lady's maid. 'She's made her match. It's Miss Laura you must work your genius on tonight. Tiffany, fetch your jewel box.'



HENRY ONLY CAUGHT a glimpse of Laura, covered in a light summer cloak, as her brother walked her out to the waiting carriage. Frederick Dymond had said apologetically that he found he had not the strength for an evening out after all. He had a very poor head. Henry wondered if this was the true reason, or if Frederick was bowing out due to a lack of evening clothes. Why had he not thought of this in advance? How distracted he must be not to have thought of it. But Frederick did look pale and tired, so he did not try to press him into changing his mind. He waited to escort the Tandys, who were now descending the stairs arm in arm.

‘How does Tiffany do?’ Mrs Tandy called when they reached the last turn of the stairs. Henry examined them with a professional eye. ‘*Exquise*,’ was his pronouncement on Tiffany’s choice of a silver-gauze gown with a blue silk slip beneath. Her cape was trimmed with swansdown and she wore diamonds in her ears and hair.

‘And how do I do?’ Mrs Tandy enquired, striking a pose. Henry regarded her abundance of ostrich feathers and flame-coloured silk. ‘My best colour,’ Mrs Tandy said, smoothing her skirt at the hip. ‘That is what you told me.’

‘And it is true,’ said Henry, deciding not to criticise the showy feathers, but only praise the gown, which was of a design he had drawn especially for her. He pronounced her: ‘*Resplendissante*. It is not many Englishwomen who can wear fire,’ he said, though he had said it to her before. ‘It takes a lady who is perfectly comfortable and confident in herself.’

‘Everyone in town copies the designs you made for us,’ Tiffany told him as they made their stately way to the carriage. ‘You are quite the celebrity, Henry. I hear Sheridan is writing a play about you, he’s calling it *Beau Brown*. I wonder if we shall all be in it? What a lark, as Ralph would say.’

The ladies took their carriage seats, and Henry took the reins. Frederick waved them off from his bedroom window. It was barely a half hour drive to Greaves Manor. Henry helped the ladies down from the carriage, enveloped first in a cloud of ostrich feathers, then in tickly soft swansdown. Miss Dymond was helped by a footman from the other side of the carriage; thus it was only on reaching the manor, where the ladies’ cloaks were taken that Henry saw Miss Dymond properly for the first time that evening. He stared at her. He had seen her in that gown before, for he had made it himself, but he had not

seen her dressed by the hand of an expert lady's maid before. She wore a delicate citrine necklace, and her hair was arranged to fall in fashionable waves, caught up in a filet at the back.

She did not look like Miss Dymond, the companion, or Miss Dymond, the schoolteacher; she looked every inch a lady. She caught him staring and flushed, smiling shyly as she said, 'Are you admiring your gown?'

'No. I'm admiring you.' He put an arm out. 'Let me escort you inside.'

It was blatant that Lady Greaves and Miss Greaves were not pleased to find two beautiful young ladies walking into their drawing room. Henry realised his mistake immediately – they saw Miss Tandy and Miss Dymond as rivals. On learning that Miss Tandy was about to be married to Lord Partington, their barely veiled displeasure was appeased towards that young lady, and they made an effort to behave charmingly toward her. But Mrs Tandy was only tolerated, mother and daughter eyeing the ostrich feathers with raised eyebrows and sharing looks of disdain between them whenever Mrs Tandy's loud voice or laugh rang out. But their full measure of disdain was reserved for Miss Dymond.

'Where did you say you lived, Miss Dymond?' Lady Greaves enquired as they dined on the first course of soup.

'In London, my lady.'

'In which part?'

Henry, not wishing to give them a reason to look down on Miss Dymond, jumped in to say, 'Hanover Square has been her home for some time. That is where I first met Miss Dymond.'

'Laura is like one of the family,' said Mrs Tandy, speaking even louder than usual, for she had been placed at the bottom of the table.

'Miss Dymond lives with you?' enquired Miss Greaves.

'Laura was Tiffany's companion,' Mrs Tandy informed her hosts.

'Oh,' said Miss Greaves, 'a *paid* companion.'

Miss Dymond flinched, and Henry said, 'You did not hear what Mrs Tandy said, Miss Greaves. She said Miss Dymond was one of the family.'

'How could I not hear what Mrs Tandy said?' Miss Greaves said, then laughed to cover her flash of sarcasm. She lowered her voice to speak privately to him. 'She is a very good creature, I am sure, but so *loud*. I do think Miss Tandy delightful, however. I only marvel that she is so elegant with such a mother.' Miss Greaves saw the look on Henry's face and fell silent. An uncomfortable silence now fell upon all the diners, and little was said for the remainder of the meal. All were relieved when the dessert course was taken away and the ladies could retire.

Henry and Sir Greaves sat over the obligatory glass of port. Sir Greaves eyed Henry over the decanter. 'I think you must be aware, my lord, that my little Verity has taken a liking to you.'

Henry gave a tight smile. 'And I think very highly of Miss Greaves, sir.'

'I think she was a little put out tonight to see you come in with two beauties. You must forgive her if she were a tad pettish.'

'Miss Greaves is never anything but charming,' was the gallant reply.

Sir Greaves shifted in his chair. 'Look here, my lord, I shall speak frankly. I think my little girl has set her heart on you, if you take my meaning. Now what do you say?'

Henry hesitated while he thought how best to answer. 'Miss Greaves is very young, sir. Perhaps she should see something of society. When she has met other young men, she may find she does not rate me quite so highly.'

'Her mother likes to think of her settling close by,' argued Sir Greaves. 'Verity's son will be my heir. Two estates in the same county joined together. A perfect fit, don't you see?'

Henry could not argue with this. He twirled his glass stem between his fingers. He had never liked port; it was something about the colour and viscosity of it. It reminded him of blood. It reminded him of the lake at his childhood home in France – the last memory he had of his home was of that lake, turned blood red by the rising sun. Red as the blood running in the streets of Paris...

'There are more valuable things than land and money, Sir Greaves. Family, friendship, love. That is what I seek in a marriage partner.'

'Excellent. You can have all that in Verity.'

Henry put the glass away from him. 'I do not love Miss Greaves,' he said quietly. 'I think very highly of her. I know she will make an excellent match when she goes into society. But...I am in love with someone else.'

'I see.' Sir Greaves leaned back. 'She'll be disappointed.' He frowned into his port. 'As will the wife. I'd best get them up to town as quick as I can.' He drained his glass.

'I am sorrier than I can say to disappoint them, sir. Truly I am.'

'Well, let's go and join the ladies.' Sir Greaves heaved himself from his chair and tugged down his waistcoat. 'Hear Sheridan's writing a play about you.'

Henry admitted it was so.

'I like that Mrs Tandy,' said Sir Greaves. 'I know Lady Greaves and Verity can be a tad too nice, but I like a woman with spirit. Reminds me of the girl I was in love with when I was young.' He smiled nostalgically. 'Often wondered how life would have turned out if I'd

married her rather than the girl my father picked out, not that Lady Greaves hasn't been a good wife, but...' He finished with a shrug and patted Henry on the shoulder. 'You marry the Dymond girl. Very pretty gal.'

Henry was going to ask how Sir Greaves knew that it was Miss Dymond he loved, but they had reached the door of the drawing room. He did not miss the enquiring look Miss Greaves gave her father as they entered. Sir Greaves avoided his daughter's eye, and that of his wife's, and sat down next to Mrs Tandy to begin a lively conversation, punctuated by Mrs Tandy's laughter. Henry looked round for Laura; she was in the far corner, her back to the company, standing at a table of books and albums. He thought there was an air of dejection in her bowed head and shoulders and was about to go to her when Miss Greaves commanded his attention by offering to make him tea.

'Why don't you play, Verity?' suggested Lady Greaves when the tea had been served. Laura re-joined the party, taking a seat by Miss Tandy.

Miss Greaves always looked at an advantage when she was at her harp. Henry loved music, and his attention was soon absorbed by the playing.

'Do you play, Miss Tandy?' Lady Greaves was saying as the music drew to a close.

'Not at all, my lady,' confessed Miss Tandy. 'But Laura plays divinely on the piano. I have not heard her play in an age.'

Lady Greaves looked surprised and not entirely pleased.

'Play us one of your pretty tunes, Laura,' Mrs Tandy piped up. 'Play one of the ballads.'

'Oh, I am very out of practise,' protested Miss Dymond, looking vexed. 'I have not played properly in a long time.'

'Please do, Miss Dymond,' urged Miss Greaves sweetly. Henry suspected she thought Miss Dymond would be put to a disadvantage after her own accomplished performance. He was going to make some excuse on Miss Dymond's behalf, thinking that it was not fair that she should be pressed into playing publicly; after all, she certainly had no piano at her cramped lodgings to practice on. But Laura got up and moved to the instrument, looking vulnerable as she perched on the stool, her light figure a contrast to the deep mahogany wood of the piano. She riffled through a pile of music, looking for a piece.

'I hope Miss Dymond does not have trouble finding something,' said Miss Greaves, seating herself beside Henry on the sofa. 'Mama will not have the populist music, she thinks it vulgar. We only have that which requires a deal of proficiency.' She smoothed down her skirt and turned to see Henry's face. 'That was a new piece I played tonight.'

'It was delightful, as always,' said Henry.

'I thought you might like it.'

He was aware of her gaze upon him, willing him to look at her and engage with her, but at that moment the music began. It was a false note, and Miss Greaves tittered, trying to hide her laugh with a little cough. Miss Dymond flushed and Henry wished he had not brought her into a company who laughed at her, but she struck the keys again, and this time she found her stride, and Haydn's sonata began to soar, and he was mesmerised. The notes faded as the piece ended. Mrs Tandy clapped enthusiastically.

'She would do well to practise her timing,' was all Miss Greaves said tightly, and Henry wondered how he could ever have considered her as a wife. 'What say you, my lord?' she pressed.

'I say that everything Miss Dymond does, she does very well indeed.' He could not wait any longer. He stood up. 'Forgive our early departure, my lady, but my guests have been travelling today and I would not keep them out late.'

Farewells were made, and Henry made sure to reach Miss Dymond before the footman did, that he might put her cloak on and escort her to the carriage.

'You did not need to leave so early on our account,' she said.

'I confess I used that as an excuse to get away,' admitted Henry. 'I'd had quite enough of their company for one evening.' He helped her into the carriage, then turned to assist the other ladies.

'La,' said Mrs Tandy. 'Those ladies are as cool as a pair of trout, but Sir Greaves is a good fellow.'

'I think you made a conquest, ma'am,' said Henry.

'Miss Greaves is very elegant,' was Tiffany's conclusion. 'But she thinks too well of herself. And she certainly thinks highly of you, Henry.'

'She plays beautifully,' was all Miss Dymond would say, but she looked sad as she said it.

LAURA WISHED AGAIN that she had not come. It was all too bittersweet. Seeing Lord Lansdowne being pursued by the beautiful Miss Greaves reminded her of how desirable he was in the eyes of society now that he was rich. He was no longer Mr Brown, free to walk with a mere paid companion, free to talk with her as an equal. Her momentary relief on realising that Tiffany was not his object of affection had been quickly crushed by the events of the evening.

As the carriage rolled along, Laura replayed in her mind the scenes in Lady Greaves' drawing room. When the ladies had withdrawn after dinner, leaving the men to their port, Miss Greaves had diverted Laura to a corner of the room, claiming she wished to show her some

engravings of the house. Laura had graciously accepted Miss Greaves' attention, thinking perhaps the young lady was regretting her little show of malice at the dinner table.

'Here is Greaves Manor from the west,' Miss Greaves said, lifting the cover from a large engraving. 'You can see the boundary line just there where Lord Lansdowne's lands begin. You can imagine how Papa and Henry do talk of how the estates will merge.'

'You and Lord Lansdowne are to...unite the estates?'

Miss Greaves smiled sweetly. 'I ought not to speak of it. Nothing has been said publicly yet. You will not repeat what I said?'

'If you wish.'

'Thank you. What a good little thing you are. No wonder your Mrs Tandy likes to have you about her for her daughter. Mama arranged for me to have a companion once, but it did not work out well. I detested having someone following me about like a little pet dog.' Another sweet smile. 'Oh, here comes Papa and dear Henry. I must go and make the tea. But I must not call him *dear Henry* in company. That is only for private conversation. I forget myself sometimes.' And she glided away to make a very pretty figure behind the tea table.

By the time the carriage reached Eastersham, Laura had made herself thoroughly miserable and was keen to escape to the privacy of her rooms. It was hard to keep up a smiling countenance when inside her heart was breaking. Lord Lansdowne assisted the ladies from the carriage, first Mrs Tandy, then Tiffany, and Laura last of all. She made a swift exit from the vehicle, avoiding his outstretched hand. Even with gloves on, it disconcerted her to be touched by him.

She was about to bid him good night and hurry away when he said, 'Miss Dymond, would you walk with me a little?'

'Walk?'

'It's a beautiful evening. There's a wall on the terrace with night-jasmine covering it. It smells better than any perfume. Let me show you.'

She rummaged about for an excuse, but he had already tucked her hand in his arm, and so she yielded, unable to resist.

'What did you think of Lady Greaves?' he asked.

She could not very well abuse his future mother-in-law by saying that she thought her haughty and cold, so she only murmured that she was a very elegant lady.

'And what of Miss Greaves?' he asked.

That was more difficult to answer. She was about to make another bland compliment but stopped herself.

'Do *you* think well of her?' she asked tentatively.

'Have I reason not to?'

'She is very lovely and accomplished...' said Laura.

‘But?’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘There is a *but* in your compliment. Tell me what you really think. We are old friends, are we not?’

‘I think...she is not good enough for you.’

There. She had said it. She glanced up at him, but there was not much light to see him by. They were walking slowly along the terrace where only the lights from the house windows lit the way.

‘What made you think I was considering her?’

‘Weren’t you? I believe she thinks so.’

‘Here is the wall I was telling you of.’ He pulled down a stem of jasmine for her to smell. She did not need to bend nearer to smell it, for the scent came in soft waves as the night breeze wafted it around them.

‘It is heavenly,’ she agreed. ‘This whole garden is.’

‘I shall have a garden seat made,’ said Henry. ‘A seat for two. Then I can sit with my wife in this very spot on summer evenings and watch the sun go down just there.’ He pointed to the west.

His wife. How those words pierced.

‘What do you think, Laura?’

It startled her out of her misery to hear him call her by her name. He was standing very close. He reached out and took her hand, pulled off her long glove and kissed it and held it. It was all rather dreamlike: the moonlight, the perfumed air, this unexpected caress.

‘What are you doing?’ she whispered.

‘Will you have me, Laura?’

‘I thought...Miss Greaves...?’

He shook his head. Half his face was in shadow.

‘You never thought of her?’

‘Perhaps I did. But only because I thought you lost to me. I’ve never been so happy to be introduced to someone’s brother before.’

‘Oh. I see. And I thought...I thought it was Tiffany you loved.’

‘Tiffany! What on earth made you think that?’

‘Your smile. You always gave her that smile of yours. You only smile quietly at me.’

‘You foolish girl. You are the only one who gets my real smile. The other one is part of the job. My work is...was...to make women feel beautiful. I don’t need to pretend anything with you.’

A thought struck her; something that had been puzzling her all day. ‘Was it you who paid Frederick’s debts?’

He hesitated, then admitted that it was.

‘How did you know about him?’

‘I’m sorry, but I saw you go into that *place* on one occasion. I confess I followed you out of concern. You said you were visiting a

friend, and so, I made the connection in my mind. But, happily, not quite the right one.'

'You knew all that time? And you thought he was my husband?'

'What else was I to think? You said you were an only child. Perhaps you said you were an only daughter. But what does it matter now? All that matters now is that you answer my question.'

'Ask me again.'

'Will you have me, Laura?'

'And you promise to build me a bench? Right here, in this very spot.'

'I promise to build us a bench. We'll sit here on summer evenings smelling the jasmine, watching the sun go down. When we're old and silver-haired, dear Laura, you will still look like the beautiful girl I proposed to all those years ago.'

'Then the answer is yes. A thousand times yes.'



SOCIETY DEEMED the new Lady Partington a great success. She was hailed as the most beautiful hostess in London. But then, she had been dressed by the famous Beau Brown.

It was a sad loss to society that Mr Brown, now Lord Lansdowne, only ever designed his wife's clothes now. Society needed the high standards of real designers more than ever, for the lower classes were doing their best to ape their betters with readymade cravats and whole lines of affordable readymade clothing rivalling the exclusive couture of Bond Street.

It was unfortunate that Lady Partington should have a father and a brother who were in trade, and a mother who was an eccentric philanthropist, but society forgave Lady Partington this, for the father was wise enough not to show himself publicly, while the charitable balls Lady Partington and her mother held were highly entertaining and raised a good deal of money for orphans and prison families.

It was not certain what line of trade the brother of Lady Partington was in; he was rather elusive when asked. But he was a good addition to any party, being of a sociable and lively temperament. Many of the debutantes considered him a fine catch, due to his pleasing temper and his substantial wealth, but he gave society gossip enough to last a whole season when he married the governess of his adopted brother – a young lady of good connections, fallen on hard times, it was true, and a regular rags-to-riches romance for her – but a *governess*!

It served Mrs Tandy right, was the general opinion; if she would make a pet of all her servants, then she must bear the consequences. Not that she seemed unduly upset about the marriage. What an Eccentric. What a family!

Sightings of a man of the description of Morton Butternock were made in various parts of the Continent during the post-war years. It seemed he posed as a man of the gentry living abroad, gaining his rental accommodation on credit, then making a hasty departure from whichever town he had run up debt in. But all sightings of him ceased after some years, and he was lost to the known world.

Henry and Laura did enjoy their summer evenings at Eastersham, watching the sun going down over their family home. Frederick Dymond was never entirely in good health, but he did recover enough to complete his studies at Cambridge and receive ordination. He was given the living at Eastersham when it became vacant, married the late vicar's granddaughter, and was very pleased to christen his

nephew and two nieces in the church font.

Sheridan's play *Beau Brown* was hailed as a great success.

Everyone loves a comedy and a happy ending.

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